Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/mrsbente00celarich

MRS BENTE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE TRIAL OF MAN

PILGRIMAGE
[Wayfarers Series]

MUCH ADO ABOUT SOMETHING

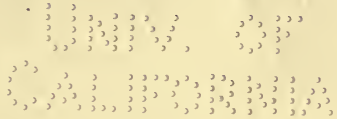
THE ARNOLD LIP

THE WISDOM OF THE APOCRYPHA

MRS BENTE

BY

C. E. LAWRENCE



LONDON: 48 PALL MALL

W. COLLINS SONS & CO. LTD.

GLASGOW MELBOURNE AUCKLAND

Copyright 1918

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

961
L419
mi

TO

SIR WILLIAM P. TRELOAR BART.

IN SIMPLE THANKS FOR

MUCH KINDNESS

CHAPTER I

THE guiding principle of St Brendan's Clergy House was vigorous simplicity. In its cosiest room, the common-room, the cushions were of hard leather, presumably more for argumentative thumping than the easing of repose. The arm-chairs were cane, and the distempered walls, the mantelpiece, the two tables, had as little ornament as might be. A few prints, not of a religious nature, hung above the fireplace and faced the two windows, and there was an athletic group which showed the Vicar as a pale and earnest student, long-haired and whisker-touched. The other rooms, wherein the three clergymen slept or worked, were even more plainly furnished than this, which was called common.

Vigorous simplicity was the note of the house, from the attic, where Fred the boot-boy slept, and in exciting secret read his penny 'orribles, to the front doorstep which was not piously clean, for the parishioners called often, and invariably brought dirt on their boots. It was a way they had down by the Docks.

With noise, much breathing, and the blowing of smoke from a stuttering pipe, the Vicar came vigorously into the common-room.

'Nobody here?' he said aloud, and subsided heavily into the widest of the waiting arm-chairs.

What a change was there! The Vicar was translated. The earnest student with the black locks and protuberant throat was transformed into a wide and weighty man, with a stubbly black beard, bristling hair, and the appearance of force and strength. His huge fist would have graced the blacksmith of the spreading chestnut tree. He grunted to himself through sheer energy of being.

After a minute or two, during which he looked without purpose about him, plucked at his beard and slapped his knee vigorously to remove some all-but-invisible fluff—the actions were signs of intolerable energy—he raised himself from his creaking chair, stumped to and opened the door, and bawled downstairs:—

'Where are you, Arthur?'

No answer.

'Fred, where's Mr Jerome?'

He waited.

'Fred!'

Still no answer at the moment came, so he marched back to the chair, again flung himself into it—the poor thing staggered—and resumed his blowing of tobacco-smoke.

He reached over, took a weekly paper of the snappy-scrappy order from the central wooden table, looked through it for ten seconds, and flung it back. He was not in the mood for *Bubble-and-Squeak*. There was a book-case behind him. He half turned to look critically at the backs of the tattered volumes which

stood, starving in their rags, and shook his head at them.

'Where can he be?' he said, and was answered by a knock at the door. Fred, his eyes a-shine because the villain of 'The Mystery of the Dark Dower-House' had fallen down a cliff, and the lovers—she the youngest daughter of a duke, he a flying Lieutenant in the Navy—were prospectively reunited, put in his head.

'Did you call, sir?' he squeaked.

'I did,' the Vicar squeaked back, mimicking. 'Where's Mr Jerome?'

'Out, sir. I think 'e's at the club. 'E was going to practise Winkle with the left-'ook.'

The lad rubbed his nose with the side of his bare arm.

'Very well, Fred; so Winkle's going to give you the knockout, what?'

Fred broke into a grin.

'I think not,' he answered with studied solemnity, and withdrew. In the passage he practised the swing of the hook, and in his mind's eye saw Winkle sprawling, while a curate in a collar counted ten.

The room darkened as the day aged. The Vicar was glad to rest in the repose of the twilight. It was not often he could indulge that condition of wakeful siesta and he enjoyed it, although his body was iron and his nerves were steel and seemingly non-existent.

He smoked and stared at the wall, and thought in vague progression of the details of parochial organisation and the struggling circumstances of his church. St Brendan's parish was no bed of roses.

There was interruption at last. Gervase Bente,

the junior curate, came quietly in. There was, at the first impression, something extraordinarily gentle about the personality of this knight of the militant church. Once during moments of genial, idle chaff in a small clerical company (always so earnestly humorous), when Bente had not been present, the Vicar had dubbed him 'Lady B.' The nickname was not unjustified. At times, such as this, there was something almost womanly about Gervase Bente. And yet was his gentleness that of a man who could be strong enough, physically and in character, when the need called. He was a slave to his consideration for others, sometimes carrying self-sacrifice in the passages of everyday life even to unnecessary lengths. He was an idealist with biceps.

'I'm glad somebody's come,' said the Vicar. 'With Arthur teaching Winkle the knock-out, and you instructing workhouse old women in the niceties of the Oxford accent, and every blooming parishioner minding his own blooming business, I've had the laziest hour of my life.'

'Glad to hear it. Shall I light the gas, so that you can see how idle you are?'

'Yes, if you like; but I am quite content.' He yawned. 'Confound it! I'd better do some work, this is demoralising.'

'No, take it easy for another hour! Rest until evensong.'

Bente struck a match and lit a gas-jet, which flared and sang until it was regulated, subdued. The Vicar watched him with the casual interest of the active man

in a condition of joyous laziness. He noticed the pallor of the curate.

'You look rather rotten, Gervase. I'm working you too hard.'

'You!' answered the other with a shadowy smile. 'You wouldn't work any one too hard. You want to do it all yourself.'

The Vicar grunted.

'Anyhow, you must take things easier.'

'Oh, I can't. That's the simple truth. It's all too glorious.' His eyes were alight with enthusiasm. 'I just enjoy this old parish.'

The Vicar watched the eager face with a curious interest. He was not naturally an observant man; but when he did notice anything he noticed it. Bente sat down on the cold and shiny sofa, and breathed a sigh.

'I had a rare spiritual experience to-day,' he said.

The Vicar was not at the moment keen for rare spiritual experiences. He was rather thinking of bromides and nerve rest for this silent, excitable, enthusiastic lieutenant of his. Evidently the strain was telling even on his excellent constitution. The slums beat all but the strong men.

Not receiving any encouragement to proceed with the detailed telling of the rare experience, Bente for the time being closed the gates of his confidence. He took out of the wide pocket of his loose, black clerical jacket a little slippery book of devotions; but instead of opening and reading it, as was his habit and intention,

played with the tassel of its marker, and lost himself in a muse.

It was then that the asceticism of his countenance became more apparent. His pale cheeks seemed to become paler and thinner. His eyes appeared to take a deeper light. He had a prominent nose and an adequate chin; but the face was not that of a strong man. His lips were for ever working and twitching; the long fingers which played with the tassel did not cease to move.

'What was it?' asked the Vicar suddenly.

Gervase Bente returned in a flash from his state of reverie; but his natural tendency towards reserve held him, now that the Vicar had missed his chance.

'Perhaps I had better wait,' he said. 'It is only an opportunity at present.'

The curate looked at his companion with eyes shrouded with thought. The tone of his voice was uncertain, vague.

The Vicar opened his mouth to speak; but closed it again. He put back his pipe and went on smoking.

Gervase found the place in his Treasury of Devotion and looked with determined eyes at its page: but again his attention wavered; almost at once he was gazing abstractedly at the wall, called by and appreciating an invisible picture. He was troubled, as would have been sufficiently evident to an interested observer.

The third of the clerical company then came in.

Arthur Jerome was a vigorous youth (youth was still the word) of seven-and-twenty. His ill-shaven chin and upper lip, the consequence not of carelessness

but of a perpetually ill-set razor, and an ungenerous sort of soap, as well as the bull-dog build of his face, caused him to look but little like the curate of a maiden's dreams.

'For goodness' sake let's have tea early. I could eat a house,' he said, 'and all that's in it. That young Winkle's coming on. In a brace of shakes he'll take on any fellow his own weight, and down him beautifully. It's a strange thing; there are fellows in the Bible class whose ideas of boxing are no better than a ballet-girl's. It's pat and keep the distance with them all the time. Bally mosquitoes! But with Winkle—the very first moment he put on the gloves I said, "Here's a fighter—these are fists," and I——'

'Then took an interest in his immortal soul,' said the Vicar dryly.

'Yes. You're extraordinarily astute, old chap—out of the pulpit.'

Both he and the Vicar laughed. It was the noisy hilarity of proved good comrades, whose sense of humour is unvarnished. Gervase Bente was looking a little shocked. He slipped his book of devotions into his pocket.

'Cheer up, Gervase! Don't be downhearted. It's only little me! Can't I ring for tea now?' went on the British Bull-dog.

'You can,' the Vicar answered, 'It's physical exercise, if it has no other use. Mrs Jones's deafness is deafer than deafness when she doesn't want to hear; and we don't get grub before her ladyship pleases.'

'Oh well, here goes! I'll brave the dragon's wrath!'

Jerome rang, and rang, and rang, thrice, deliberately, to emphasise the fact that the summons was insistent and peremptory.

'Now you've done it!' said the Vicar. 'That's spoilt the toast!'

'I can't say that I am much of an ornament in the pulpit,' went on Jerome, who was indeed entirely indifferent about his often proved oratorical incapacity. 'I always get stumped for words unless I keep banging the cushion, and that always takes the choir's attention from what I want to say. That's the worst of having a reputation.'

'You are indeed a rotten preacher, Arthur!' Bente declared.

'We none of us are brightest specimens,' the Vicar confessed, 'but I'll bet Arthur gets invited to preach at St Paul's before you or I do, Gervase. You're too finicking, your voice is too pale and sweet——'

'Pale and sweet is good!' murmured Jerome.

'And I—I can't be lucid when I talk theology. Not that the people want theology, bless their hearts! Give them an easy flow, with time for a trot before supper, and they're all right.' The Vicar puffed at his pipe with a contented expression. 'They like to be told that life is like a railway train, or a string of barges. They enjoy a touch of imagination like that.'

Fred put his head in at the door.

'Did you ring, sir?' he asked meekly.

'I'll wring your neck, young fellow, if we don't have tea at once. Here's the Vicar dying for sustenance. Look at the time! What's Mrs Jones up to?'

'She said as I—she desired me to say, sir,' he corrected himself, 'as 'ow if the gentlemen were impatient they could 'ave tea now at once; but that as the milkman 'adn't brought the milk——'

'All right, Fred! Tell Mrs Jones we'll wait till the hens have laid. Clear off! . . . That boy can't shut the door without banging it. Oh, Vicar, why can't we get rid of her?' Jerome asked of his chief, 'she really is the wussest!'

'Quite true, Arthur! She is; but I can't chuck her. She couldn't do anything else, there would only be the workhouse; she hasn't a friend in the world, or a stiver other than what we pay her; so it's put up with her.'

'It's very good for us!' said Gervase Bente, who was always suspicious of comfortable worldly circumstances. 'A little discomfort is necessary.'

'Haven't we enough discomfort as it is? Good gracious! Look where we live. The least we can expect is that when we are at home our——'

'Never mind, Arthur!' the Vicar interrupted, 'you look well on it. She is a trial, I admit; she can't do anything right. She patches brown socks with blue thread, and does that as if she were making a fishing net; she would sew trouser-buttons on shirts if she weren't reminded. Oh, she's as bad a housekeeper, I admit, as woman can be. She is the complete incompetence; but we've got to put up with her.

That's the solid fact—almost as solid a fact as her milk puddings!'

'If only some millionaire would adopt her!' Jerome sighed, melodramatically.

'We could do with a millionaire down here!' piped Gervase, who was bored with the small domestic turn of the conversation Jerome had introduced, and was concerned with the larger affairs of St Brendan's parish.

'I don't know!' said the Vicar thoughtfully. 'Even a million wouldn't be enough to put these parts straight; and half measures would be worse than useless. So we'd better pig along as we are doing.'

'Now if I were boss of this show——' began Jerome.

There was the tiny tinkle of a distant handbell.

'The dinner-gong!' cried the Vicar. 'Mrs Jones has done one good thing. She's enabled us to escape the boredom of Arthur's Utopia. Come on, Gervase! Food! Food! Arthur could eat a house. I could manage a warship. You——?'

'He? The Reverend Mr Bente would be satisfied with an orange pip. Don't tell me I smell kippers. Can it be?'

'Can she have worked a surprise? Mind the corner, Gervase! I don't believe you realise that stairs are material things—built upon emptiness.'

The clergy were thumping down. Their boots made a chorus.

'No, Arthur,' said the Vicar thoughtfully, 'I don't think it's fish. I think it's blacking. Fred's been doing the boots.'

'Let us hope till the door's open at any rate! *Ouvrez la porte,* Gervase!'

Gervase did so. The three peered in at the table.

'Eggs!' said the Vicar. 'It surely can't have been——'

'It must have been blacking.'

'Never mind; here goes. Do or die!'

They did.

CHAPTER II

BEFORE he went to bed that night Gervase Bente wrote a letter to his aunt and nearest relative, the spinster who had been to him a comparatively good mother, a faithful guardian, an exacting idealist, an impeccable aunt. He loved her with the full warmth of his shyly affectionate nature. He was to her as a good and adoring son. Good was at all his ages the adjective to apply to Gervase; hence, his becoming a clergyman.

'How the time flies!' he wrote, after the usual essential, unimportant preliminaries. 'I have now been at St Brendan's three months, all but a few days, and am really extraordinarily happy. (He was in some of his departments very enthusiastic.) The Vicar and Jerome are trumps—that's the word they would use, and I often find myself employing their expressions. Mr Richards is a wonderful man, brusque at times, but never over-bearing: it is a joy to work with him. He is just the man for this parish. He'd be lost at Nuneholm (the name of Miss Bente's village) and any other Sleepy Hollow: but this hard parish with its need for strength brings out all his spiritual muscularity.'

The phrasing of these sentences had exhausted

tissues worn through a long day. Bente's nerves were delicate vehicles. He rose for relief, and went to the window, looking out into the street below. The sight was dismal enough. Black houses and a stony causeway. Yellow gas-lamps were dotted here and there, making the darkness miserably visible. There were puddles between the square, stone blocks with which the road was paved, and the gutters gleamed with rain water, to remain there stagnant until the dry heat of summer should dominate, and draw up the damp with rapid evaporation. He softly opened the window to lean out and stare at a walking shadow shuffling underneath. He peered at the vague figure until it reached the lighted space beneath the lamps of the public-house at the corner.

'Ah! I thought it was. I'm glad it wasn't!' he mused; and shutting the window gently, drew across it the dingy cretonne curtain, and returned to the table and his task.

He read what he had done, checking a word here and there, punctuating, ending by saying aloud the ultimate words.

'The people down here are, considering their difficulties, a fine lot. They live the roughest possible sort of existence and yet keep extraordinarily cheerful. It bucks one up to see their cheeriness, in spite of insufficiency of food and crowded, often insanitary, dwellings. The Vicar wants me or Arthur—that is, of course, Jerome, my colleague—to go on the borough council. But A. J. won't, because he prefers working among the live people of the parish, especially the

young fellows who need him; and I do not feel any vocation that way. I looked in at their meeting on Wednesday—they were complaining about the unfairness of the incidence of the rates the whole time. I think it was that. They were very querulous and not at all well-mannered. You don't blame me for not taking the opportunity, do you? I feel I should be so useless. I am so ignorant about concrete and drain-pipes. The only thing attractive about the idea is its intense hideousness. I don't mean this to be a sort of paradox, such as your adored Flashterton writes; but you will, I am sure, understand my meaning. You always did. You are the only human being I can talk to with absolute confidence and frankness. There are one or two intimate things I can't find myself telling the Vicar, which I can tell you.'

Again he paused, and biting his pen, stared at the wall in a waking dream. Should he confide all he was thinking and planning to this aunt who had won his confidence and sympathy? He noticed, with the passive part of his apprehension, that the black-framed print of Dürer's 'The Knight, Death, and the Devil,' which occupied the chief place over his mantelpiece, amid a galaxy of portrayed saints and diminished engravings after Whistler and Watts, his own possessions, was not quite straight. It must, of course, be straightened. He rose, put the picture level, and returned to his seat. The brief, characteristic interruption had settled his decision.

'I have another reason for not becoming a borough

councillor. I can speak to you frankly. My business is to save souls; and in this parish, this world of the all-but-forgotten which has St Brendan's for its centre, there are souls to be saved: and there is one which will need all my ardour and all my prayers. I have vowed to God that unless He shows me by some visible sign or other manifestation which my conscience can receive and accept, that I am not the instrument for this mission, I will save that soul.'

He put down his pen and clasped his hands. His eyes had a light of energy, enthusiasm, even fanaticism. His face seemed to shine. He made an effort and controlled himself. He resumed his writing.

'This would be an achievement worthy of Christ's warrior, as humbly (I can tell *you*) I aspire to be. To pluck one brand from the burning, to save even one soul alive, is to win the reward.'

He drew a line, deep and black, nearly across the page, and then, as with a forced determination, wrote of the family trivialities, asked the little questions about people, creatures, familiar places which are of concern to the intimates of a domestic circle, until he came to the 'Yours affectionately,' and the cramped signature which brought the dutiful epistle to its close.

He did not re-read the letter: he left it as it was. He was sensitive about his own outpourings, shy of realising the outer expression of his own superlative intentions; and yet he needed the comfort of making this confidence and let the epistle go.

When Miss Bente, on the morrow, in the hour before

luncheon, received and read the letter, she smiled in her gentle way.

'Dear Gervase! He ought not to have gone to the East End, he is not nearly strong enough for that.'

That was all she said to herself, about his spiritual aspirations; but for days and weeks thereafter she thought of his cryptic words and wondered whose soul was to be saved. On these things her nephew was silent. There was no report of developments, but Grace Bente was in no respect anxious. She knew her Gervase, had trusted him with justice since the years of his lisping.

Meanwhile, her Gervase plunged into the routine work of St Brendan's with an increased and growing devotion which made the practical Vicar still more anxious for his health. Such a curate was a godsend. If Bente had been blessed with the physique of Arthur Jerome, his enthusiasm would have been used by the Vicar to its topmost possibilities. On the Ossa of his enterprise he would have piled Pelion and super-Pelion; but it was not Tom Richards's way, with all his primal simplicity and native force, to be inconsiderate. He refrained from adding unduly to the necessary drudgery of his second mate, who thereby was enabled to adventure on the spiritual excursions—such as that alluded to in the letter to his aunt—which were his heart's and his soul's urgent desire. If martyrdom had been a local possibility, Gervase Bente would have been keyed-up even to that.

Thanks to the rigours of their circumstances—to which Mrs Jones contributed—and his own

insatiable zest for exacting endeavours—living the East End parson's life to its ultimate nth of religious, social and personal service—he became daily more unbecomingly emaciated. His nose was thin and sharpened ; it emphasised the seeming asceticism, and even increased the apparent weakness of his face. Whatever his religious ambitions might be, they were assuredly too weighty for that over-taxed body and overstrained eagerness. But what devoté, what fanatic—though Gervase was hardly that—cares for the cost of the dear adventure? The enterprise was so high that even failure, the result of an insufficiency of strength, would itself have been some reward.

Failure was, however, not a word in Gervase Bente's dictionary.

CHAPTER III

EVEN the outcast parish of St Brendan has its instalment of local pride, or vanity, or snobbishness. Compared with any other part of London, it has nothing whatever to be proud of; but when compared with its own immediate surroundings, its Alma Terrace feels justified in putting on airs.

It is a row of high, two-story houses, Victorian of tone, with odd window blinds, and faded, painted numbers on disconsolate fanlights. The occupants of the Terrace are generally lodgers, occasionally landladies; sometimes, but rarely, officials employed in the adjacent docks. Drab and disconsolate though it be, to all who for some incomprehensible reason visit the district, it is the only place in the parish of St Brendan which lifts a self-conscious head. Even the public-houses round about it wear aspects of complaint.

In the end house of this undetached row of eight, lived the blameless widow Barnes. She maintained herself by letting lodgings. An ancient profession, in which the widow without flaunting her fortune took a proper pride. Just at present Mrs Barnes had no fortune to flaunt, for with the exception of a senile pensioner who just had means enough to make ends

meet with a little over for the landlady's necessity, there was nobody but one; and she was not a considerable source of income and profit to Mrs Barnes—to say the least of it.

How Mrs Barnes managed to pay the rent, and the rates, from the earnings of this comparative mansion no one not of her profession can possibly comprehend. How she kept the place clean is more easily understood—for she did not keep it clean. The flight of a dozen steps which led up to the front-door was gray with years and the hue that comes of an elaborate neglect. The windows were stained, the blinds uneven and dirty; there was a general air of drift about the place, as generally with the other houses in the row—as if Alma Terrace like a limited but vain old maid had been disappointed and had lost heart. Mrs Barnes prided herself on the elegance and the polish of her domicile, within and without; and merited not one ounce of her self-satisfaction.

She was a lady who moved heavily and yet must get about, for in those days of the comparative independence of domestics there was no servant available for 'Number 8.' 'Helps' to be hired must have wages; Mrs Barnes had no money to give to 'the sluts,' as in her elderly superiority she felt entitled to call them. So the sluts were rarely in the place, and Mrs Barnes 'did' for herself—which meant that she didn't.

From the basement—her own quarters, except when she could let the rooms, which nowadays was almost never—she was proceeding to the back room—a bed-sitting room—on the first floor.

'Lazy 'ussy,' she was grumbling. 'Fine going's on for a respectable lady's house; gone two, and still a-bed, the nasty 'ussy. I 'ate 'ussies—always did!'

By this time she had reached the door of the room wherein the 'ussy was at rest, and knocked with the knuckles of determination.

'It's ever so late, dearie. Won't you get up?'

There was no evident answer. Mrs Barnes stared at the panels with listening eyes. She rapped again, louder. There came a voice in querulous answer.

'Oh, don't keep on doing that! What do you want?'

'It's getting on for four o'clock!' screamed the landlady, with modified truth.

'Oh, get away; I'm tired.'

'And ought to be, with them goings-on!' retorted Mrs Barnes, *sotto voce*.

'What are you saying?' came the sharp inquiry.

'Only what a pity it is your lying a-bed all this beautiful day.'

Silence followed the evasion.

'Won't you get up, dear?' This in the tone of wheedling.

'Do bring me a cup of tea, Mrs B., will you? I'm so—I've got such a head!'

The landlady scowled—she disliked making expeditions upstairs and downstairs, in the manner of Goosey-Gander—and then exclaimed in tones of false cheeriness:

'In course I will, dear—and 'ave a cup with you. Then you will get up, won't you? It makes the 'ouse feel so sleepy when there's a lie-a-bed at 'ome.'

'I will—spying cat!' The ultimate words, though loud, were not heard by the lady to whom they were addressed, as she was already making lumbering and heavy progress down the kitchen stairs.

She returned in half an hour with a clattering tray, containing a cup of tea, some dulled lumps of sugar, bluish milk, and a plate containing straggly slices of ill-buttered bread.

She opened the door and entered without knocking; she blinked in the curtained darkness.

'I think I'll open that window, dear. No wonder you've got a 'ead.'

'Oh, do shut up!' came the rejoinder from the bed-clothes.

''Ere's a nice cup of tea for you. Sit up and 'ave it, and try and eat a piece of bread-an'-butter, do!'

The coaxing of the landlady was an irritant to the person tended. Throwing back the coverlet she sat up, glaring with dark and sulky eyes at the intruder.

'I wish you wouldn't come into my room——' she began.

'Oh, if that's your game,' cried the other suddenly, with a touch of the shrillness of vulgar anger, 'I shall say things. This is a respectable 'ouse, and if I'm to be put upon by such as you, out you go, my lady! You can 'ave some people in, can't you?—And I must wait outside, like a goat at a gate? Not for me, Miss Poppy Parker!'

She put the tray on the dressing-table with a clatter.

The two glowered. There was no love found between

them: that was as evident as the dust stored in the day-lighted room.

The woman in the bed was young, and when dressed and coiffed with taste, might have looked attractive. In her present condition of outrageous négligé—her night-gown, low-cut, and decorated with a ribbon and bows of tarnished blue, revealed a thin brown neck—she was a sight unpleasing. Straight black hair hung in tangles down to her shoulders: her face was yellow with weariness and its naturally sallow complexion. Her eyes were dark and of indeterminate colour: they glowed with feverous fires.

She realised the necessity of not appearing ungracious.

'You do get in a tower, don't you, Mrs Barnes? I didn't mean to be nasty. Let us have our tea.'

The landlady was still far from relenting, but she wanted some tea herself; and in her loneliness was glad to have even this human company.

'That's better, dearie!' she avowed, without any appearance of softening or regard. She poured out some very thick tea.

'Drink this, and you'll be better!'

The young woman took the cup and stirred it with seeming repugnance.

'Drink it up: and you'll feel much better,' Mrs Barnes conjured, and declared, 'Quite washed-out, you look!'

The other sipped and glowered; then shuddered.

'I wish I could die!' she declared, with a fierce gesture and absolute melancholy. She rested her chin

between her pointed knees, and stared down a long dark gallery of miserable contemplation.

'Oh, come!' said Mrs Barnes, wheedling again, as with soiled fingers she folded a piece of bread-and-butter and held it out. 'Eat this, and you'll feel better.'

The other refused it with a shake of repugnance.

'I should choke!'

Mrs Barnes drank her tea with gulps and an immense satisfaction. 'That's better, there's nothing like a nice 'ot cup of good strong tea to drive away the wretchedness. Would you like to give me some money to go out and get you something—a piece of fried plaice or a fourpenny packet of soup-powder? I don't mind looking after you and you so lonely.'

The girl paid no attention to this offering of pity. She merely continued to stare before her; while Mrs Barnes sipped her tea and watched her lodger out of the corner of her small and cunning eyes. The apparent passivity of the lie-a-bed stirred her easy anger.

'I'm tired of this!' she declared shortly. 'What's the matter with you to-day?'

'Oh, leave me alone! I'm sick of it all!'

'And well might be! You don't think of my good name!'

Miss Parker turned to look contemptuously at her companion.

'You haven't got one. Get out of my room!' she blazed of a sudden. 'I'm not well. Go away!'

She thrust with her left hand at Mrs Barnes, who caught the extended arm and, gripping it, pinched it.

'Don't you try and hit me, you scratch cat! Leave that to those who visit you. You——' She was about to describe her lodger with frankness and with truth, but caught up her own words, through that affectation of modesty which is so insistent in smug, unrighteous breasts.

'I didn't try to hit you.' The girl now sulked, relapsing to her attitude of dreariness. 'I don't want to hurt you, Mrs Barnes; but why do you goad me? You know I'm miserable, miserable!'

She faltered. Tears came to her eyes. Mrs Barnes's scornful anger melted.

'All right, dearie!' said she, mollified. 'Give me a shilling and I'll go out and get you something nice. You do look peeky, that you do.'

The girl groped under her pillow and brought out three shillings. She handed one of the coins to Mrs Barnes.

'What shall it be, dear? A little fish and chips—or a nice fresh chop?'

'I don't care.' She sank back on the pillow and buried her head under the bed-clothes. Mrs Barnes took up the tray and went out. Her eyes were as eloquent with mystery as are those of the Sphinx. The door swung to behind her.

'Damn her! Damn her!' said her lodger.

The visit had, however, roused Poppy. No longer had she any inclination to the heavy kind of slumber that had held her until now. She got wearily out of bed, went over to the looking-glass, and gazed at herself critically.

'This life's killing me. What a wreck!' She slowly washed and dressed herself, all the while wearing an expression of entire disillusion and gloom. 'Men are swines!' was the only other expression she gave voice to during those melancholy minutes.

There was a knock at the outer door. She started, strained to listen. A glint of excitement came into her heavy eyes.

'I wonder if that is the fool!'

Nobody answered the front door. Mrs Barnes was evidently still out on the quest of the mutton-chop. The girl went into the passage and entered the front room, adjacent to her own. She peeped through the side of the blind. Instinctively her hands were at work, patting or putting into better shape her hair or the neck of her blouse. She saw who was there. A man in black.

'Shall I?' she thought.

She crept back to the passage, still considering, and stood there for a brace of moments.

'No, I'm not up to it to-day. It'll do him good not to find me at home. It'll make him keener for—for my immortal soul.'

She went into her room, and again examined her appearance in the glass.

'Yes, I'm a bit off-colour to-day. Better not!'

She heard the visitor knock once more an earnest and appealing series of raps; and then not again. Evidently he had given up hoping to find her in. She grinned as she thought of Mrs Barnes's disappointment; for to be hostess to one of the clergy, to exchange

small-talk with one of the elect, to offer a cup of gluey tea, and perhaps have a brief prayer said for her own individual self, these were privileges as enjoyable to the landlady as must be the receipt by a retired and exalted tradesman of a royal invitation to a levée.

Mrs Barnes was, however, not quite so disappointed as Miss Parker hoped and was soon to learn.

In due time she brought up a fresh herring and a glass of stout, with bread-and-butter in support. The landlady was more genial now than earlier she had been.

'I didn't ask for that,' said the lodger, staring at the food.

'No, dearie; but I know what's good for you. Now drink it up and eat the fish. I was lucky to get a fresh one so late in the day; but it's as fresh as a daisy; it'll do you good.'

Miss Parker needed no further coaxing. She drank the stout and ate the food with an eagerness she had given no promise or sign of in the earlier time of tea.

Mrs Barnes watched her; and—considering who she was—she beamed.

'You look very pleased with yourself, Mrs B.,' said Poppy sedately. 'I suppose you met the pup-parson.'

'My dear,' she said, as if she were gently chiding her, 'you should not speak of a clergyman like that. So you knew 'e called?'

'I heard him knock. I guessed it was him—damn it! he!'—She had been a governess.

'There! that's what I call instink. Such a nice gentleman! So easy to please. 'E does enjoy a cup

of my tea. Why didn't you let 'im in, dearie? Didn't like to be alone with a gentleman—but it can't 'ave been that!' There was a touch of insolent significance in the last words.

The girl looked up. Sudden, quick anger was aflame in her eyes. The discontented lips were alert.

'What do you mean—tell me what you mean by that—you old——'

'Now, now!' the other hurried to interrupt. 'Don't you call me names, when I've been out to get you this. Not much thanks, you don't give.'

'Where's the change? I gave you a bob.' The challenge was most direct. It barbed, as it was meant to do.

'And it cost a bob!' Mrs Barnes snivelled, a Cockney pseudo-martyr, and then became indignant. 'Well, I never!. If I wasn't a lady I'd give you a very straight talking to, that I would. Suspect me!—Suspect me of stealing your dirty money?'

'Never mind the money; but don't you speak like that again. Don't you let him—know—people come here——'

The girl paused. She had said enough. Mrs Barnes did not need the full-stop to be assured that a sentence was finished.

'As if I would! 'Aven't I my own good name to keep?'

'Your own good name! It makes me sick to hear you cant. Your good name! If you'd had to go through what I've been through, you'd have been what I've been!'

'And am! Don't forget that!' The insult was poignant.

'And am! Oh, I'm no hypocrite. Here,' she flamed with passion so that she fell over her words, as she threw down the knife. 'You can take the stuff away! I can't eat with you in the room. You are a poisonous woman.' Her voice was hot with hate.

'Poisonous is as poisonous does!' said the landlady unctuously, with a sneer. 'I've always been respectable. I've never done nothing my 'usband need be ashamed of!' She took up the tray and leaned back, with her lips pursed and her figure as taut as its podginess and shapelessness permitted.

'Take the tray, and clear out!' The order was peremptory.

'And you can clear out too. I'm poor enough; but I'd rather 'ave you out of this 'ouse than in it.'

Mrs Barnes backed to the door as she gave utterance to her decree of expulsion. The exultation of battle was in her veins. When she came to the obstacle she stopped with cruel enjoyment to see how her lodger accepted her fate.

Not so badly, all things considered. With an air of absolute indifference the young woman began the collection of her belongings. They seemed generally tawdry and were scattered everywhere. She was taking Mrs Barnes at her word.

This put the fear of the business-woman into the landlady's heart.

'Oh, no!' she said, with no slackening of positive

insolence, 'you don't go until you've settled. There's three days owing.'

'Not if you turn me out at a moment like this. I'm quite ready to go, Mrs Barnes; I'll not be under any obligation to you, I assure you!'

By this time the landlady's anger had grown cooler. It had suffered the colder douche of calculation. This lodger paid in tainted pence; but still she paid, and without some pence in season even residence in that poor domicile could not be enjoyed. Prudence prompted Mrs Barnes to display the white flag; but still she hesitated to wave it. She watched Miss Parker continue her preparations, which were all the swifter and more deliberate because the errant damsel was well aware that her landlady was on the brink of surrender, and there would be no need to flit before it suited herself to go.

''M! When do you think you can pay, Miss Parker?'

'Pay?' There was utter disdain, a virulent note of scorn, in the young woman's voice and mien. 'There is no difficulty in paying. I'm not a pauper.'

Mrs Barnes snorted. The crushing retort was so obvious; but, surrender was up; and there was no wish at this moment to offend.

'No, dear,' she weakly agreed.

'But I don't pay if I'm turned out at a moment's notice.'

The landlady stared at the floor in an affectation of sympathy. Had she been a crocodile she would have wept. There was no dew in that hard personality.

'I've no wish to turn you out, Miss Parker, I'm sure,'

she protested. 'I've no wish to add to your infirmities. I'm a Christian woman, I 'ope; and my text is, Let sleeping dogs lie. Not that I mean anything personal by that, Miss Parker. I——'

'Oh, do clear out!' broke in the other impatiently. 'If you stay another second I'll break something. Please go!'

Mrs Barnes stared, aghast; but had sense enough to go. She knew she could not afford to lose even this lodger; but outside the door, at the top of the landing, she paused, turned and cursed her with a glare of baleful eyes.

'You faggot!' she screamed, with an entirely muted scream; and resumed her way to the basement, talking aloud to herself and not sparing any expression against the impossible person who occupied the first floor back.

CHAPTER IV

THE Vicar came bustling into the room where Jerome was standing studying with doubtful eyes a smoking dish of hash. He held a letter in his hand.

'What swine there are in the world!' he said.

'Meaning?'

'A spiteful anonymous letter is a damnable thing.' He stormed, and waved it to and fro, and tossed it on to the table.

'Tear it up; burn it; do anything but pay attention to it,' counselled the curate. 'Shall we wait for Gervase, or begin?'

The Vicar took his seat, and plunged at the hash with fork and spoon.

'We'll begin! This is hash. I'm not keen on Mrs Jones's hash. It excites the imagination too much. Well, that's for you, Arthur. It looks like a burnt brick; it is probably called a mutton-chop. Have some more splash!' He ladled the liquid.

'Thanks, old man. I could eat even a brick. Better call Fred to carry out Gervase's portion. We may as well keep it warm. Let it, at least, have that virtue.'

'Yes, Gervase, hum!—this beast of a letter is about him.'

Putting down the fork he was holding, the Vicar flicked, with his fingers, at the unpleasant epistle.

'Then by all means burn the beast at once,' Jerome again advised. 'Don't let him see it at any rate. I suppose a woman sent it—one of our flock!'

The Vicar did not answer at once because he was disjointing a stewed something which stuck like a mollusc or blob of glue to the bottom of the dish.

'Ah!' said he, triumphantly, when he had won the victory. 'I suppose it was some beastly woman—must be, though the handwriting isn't distinctive. It has that appearance of illiteracy which neither sex has reason to be proud of . . . It's about a woman!' he added.

'Sure to be. The clergy are a sure mark for the meaner sort of malice, and a woman's nearly always the bait and the baiter. Even so good a chap as Gervase can't be—er——'

'Immune's the word you want.'

'So good of you! Have some beer, Vicar?' Like a warrior raising his shield, Arthur Jerome raised the jug.

'I knew my heart was panting for something. Thanks! Give me some froth. I like to see the fat on the top.' He gazed at the liquor with critical eyes.

'It's tired!' the other made excuse for the lame and weary beverage. 'Mrs Jones——'

'Never mind! It's called beer! Prosit!'

'Immune!' Jerome repeated. 'Bless you!' They quaffed.

'That's better!' they chorused in one breath.

'Now, once more unto the hash, dear friend . . . Yes, man or woman, it was a swine who wrote it. You may as well see it; and then it shall go the way of all paper.'

'And by showing it you serve the purpose of the writer.'

'No matter.' The Vicar passed it across. 'Besides, it doesn't serve her end; for we know Bente too well to believe anything bad of him, even if the flat evidence seemed to stare us in the face. Gervase may be a fool; but he's a Christian and a gentleman always. We must guard against blackmail.'

Arthur Jerome read the letter aloud.

'Ask the Reverend Bente why he secretly visits a female every day at A.T. Is it to pray? Blessed are the pure in heart.'

Jerome's rubicund face grew pale and grave as he contemplated the poisonous words.

'It's dreadful! By George, it is! What is the good of all our work, Vicar, if this cold sort of snakish evil is possible? The East End is a place to break the heart; it is, it is! If it weren't for the young fellers I'd chuck it up. It would be easier to be a stoker in a battleship.' He shook his head vigorously at the pepper-box.

The Vicar smiled sadly at his lieutenant, who seldom showed emotion; but whose personality, as this speech proved, was not all hide-bound.

'It is pretty rotten sometimes, old chap,' his voice was strangely gentle, 'one needs to be an optimist to be a parson down here: but it's worth while.'

'Fat lot of good is the result of all our labour.'

'I dare say; but we've got to stick it and to go on. We're on the winning side, that's sure. Have some more hash.'

'I will; and another glass of the only. Say when?' In the further downpour of flat beverage their deeper mood was drowned. Both men had too much strength and simplicity to continue in that confessedly melancholy and contemplative vein. But still the anonymous letter stared at them.

'Do you know the handwriting?' Jerome asked suddenly.

'If I did—if I did——' The Vicar frowned, and in his frowning, in his lurid dreams of punishments administered to the stabber-in-the back, forgot to conclude his sentence.

'It doesn't matter whose it is!' flashed out the indignant Arthur; 'it's a filthy hand, a filthy piece of paper—it came from a penny packet of stationery—and it has a filthy purpose. Let us destroy the beast.'

He crushed it up, and then tore it into pieces.

'Where, by the way, is Gervase?'

'And what or where is "A.T."?'

'Oh, Alma Terrace. I don't need a novelist's detective to discover that. But where is our maligned Bente?'

'He'll soon be here.' Jerome was weary of this insistent interest in the contents of the wretched letter. 'Let's talk about football or soap-bubbles, or boxing-gloves or golf-balls—anything. That letter has left a sting.'

'Oh, I don't know. Why that particular letter? It isn't the first of its kind we've had by a long chalk.'

'No, the others didn't matter or couldn't; but this one goes for Gervase, and he's as true a saint as any curate can be. He's a white man, one of the right sort; old iron and good egg. I know him.'

'So do I. Of course we do. We've lived with him for some months; and he's survived the searching ordeal. But, my dear Arthur, don't let us lose sight of the fact that he is just the sort who can be made a fool of.'

'By George, yes, he is.'

The two clergymen stared at each other gloomily. Gervase Bente was just that sort of carelessly generous spirit who needs a special providence. Impulsive and unselfish, determinately self-sacrificing and poetic of mind; an idealist whose hopes and dreams have not yet been debased or hardened through the horrid facts of a common-clay existence; and, moreover, extraordinarily inexperienced, considering his experience, he was unusually well suited to be a victim of designing and dangerous persons. Both of his colleagues knew it, and each knew that the other knew it.

'We'll have to tackle him,' said the Vicar, with decision.

'Yes, you'd better.' Jerome shrugged his bovine shoulders and smiled comfortably.

'I?' cried the other. 'Why not both of us?—What?'

'Aren't you his spiritual superior? What am I?

A child in these things. Now if it was a hook or a half-nelson.'

'Oh, shut up, Arthur!' the Vicar said testily, and tugged at his stubby beard. 'You're a humbug—or would be if you had just a little less conscience. You know very well that you could talk to Gervase in your brusque, blunt, muscular-Christianity manner in a way which I with my—with my delicacy and refinement——'

Jerome burst into a roar. The Vicar made no pause.

'My—my sensitive sympathy——' In rapt contemplation of the unexpected tendencies he was now discovering, the goodly shepherd forgot what he was going to say.

'You needn't try and wriggle out of your responsibilities!' declared the other, in his brusque, blunt, muscular-Christianity manner. 'If Gervase is to be told, and I'm not sure that he is—this hash is very satisfying and it does not make the brain clearer—you must do it. You're the man; and I'm not, and won't—that's flat. Shall I ring for Fred? Where can Gervase be?'

'He'll have to give us an account of his actions—or rather he won't. I don't know! . . . Yes, ring, there's a good chap.'

Jerome rang. Fred appeared. He removed the plates and the dish of hash that wasn't. He returned with an open jam tart with arid spaces.

'Heard anything of Mr Bente? Know where he is?' asked the Vicar of the lad.

No sooner said than hurrying footsteps made answer. Gervase Bent was returning, and evidently aware that he had forgotten the considerations of the clock.

'I'll fetch 'is 'ash, Sir,' said Fred. 'Mrs Jones said it would 'ardly be worth eating—'im coming so late.'

'We must all have been rather late,' murmured the Vicar thoughtfully.

Before Fred had returned a second time Gervase Bente came in. He sank into his chair with a sigh and was evidently very weary. He shrugged his shoulders, a sign of nervous pressure.

'Where have you been, Gervase? I must insist on my curates keeping their meal hours, at any rate. I can't afford for either you or Arthur to be knocked-up.'

'Awfully sorry I'm late, Vicar; but I am profoundly interested in an enterprise—a spiritual enterprise—which the—the angels——' he faltered as he spoke thus. It was a frank expression of an inner ideal which is perhaps out of fashion in days when the trains and tramcars run and the miracles and martyrdoms do not—'which the angels would approve.' He spurred himself to speak frankly. 'There is a soul in the balance, and I am putting the weight of my persuasion and my prayers to influence that soul in the right way. It is a great game; the finest.'

In his enthusiasm of proselytism he had forgotten weariness and all else. He might have been miles away from the parish of St Brendan, away among the hermits, among the neophytes who fled to the desert and the wilderness to be rid of the sordid realities and

the legitimate joys of the flesh. The Vicar looked at his neophyte with a very serious eye. Tom Richards did not like the look of this enthusiasm. It smacked of the emotionalism, the fanaticism, which, carried to lengths, may end in neurasthenia and madness. He flashed a glance at Jerome, who in answer gazed down earnestly at Bente's undisturbed plate.

'Yes,' agreed the Vicar, to the unspoken suggestion. 'Well, we'll have a talk of these things afterwards. Meanwhile, Gervase, forget all else now but the nourishment you need if you are to do the necessary work of this parish. Now, take this to heart, Mr Bente,' he emphasised his words by tapping the table, 'You are to keep your meals as if they were spiritual exercises. I don't want a ghost—I want a man—to do the work of my parish. Do you see? Look at Arthur, is he——?' The suggestion would have been ludicrous, as the Vicar half-meant it to be, had they not all been so serious.

'All right, Vicar!' answered Gervase Bente, somewhat perturbed by this downright injunction coming bullying into the atmosphere of ecstasy and dreams within which for an hour or two he had been living. 'I don't want to be inefficient; though food is a detestable necessity.'

'So it is, Gervase!' cried Arthur heartily. 'Sometimes it's quite detestable—Have some more. Mrs Jones said it was suffering because you weren't in time to eat it.'

'I'm sorry,' was the humble answer. 'May I trouble you for a little water?'

'Try a little claret.'

Gervase shook his head and continued to peck at his meal.

'Do smoke,' he said, as he realised the others were waiting and watching him.

'Now, you know you don't like it, Gervase. And mine's such shaggy shag—well, we'll open the window and sit in the distance. Come on, Arthur. We'll smoke and see that Gervase doesn't dodge his due allowance. Peg away, man! You eat as if life was a sort of headache, and not the jolly good battle-field it is. That's an idea for Sunday night's sermon, Arthur. You can develop it; but don't bring in the prize ring; otherwise the choir will forget they're choristers. You are so deucedly literal in your gestures.'

Thus, artfully, did the Vicar endeavour to lure the thoughts of his junior curate from the dazzling subject upon which they had been concentrated; and all the while that he was puffing at the pipe, all the while that he and Jerome were discussing little questions of interest to their properly parochial minds, he was furtively studying the aspect of Gervase, and the rapt expression of his face. He was piqued by the condition of reticence and exaltation in which he found the curate, who still, though with evident distaste, ate his meal and sipped the water.

The Vicar was in something of a quandary. He shrank from questioning Gervase on a subject that was not voluntarily raised. The basic principle of their work in St Brendan's was confidence and trust in one another; and it was impossible for them in their daily

dealings with many people to consult together on means and possibilities, except in particular cases which required special consideration or joint treatment. Gervase Bente was no child as the years go. He had an excellent record at Oxford and Cuddesdon; and was unquestionably trustworthy so far as things of honour were concerned. But was he—and this was the kernel of the Vicar's cogitation—was he not liable to be imposed upon; and that vile letter was successful in its object so far as this suggestion was concerned—might not a clever 'female' make a fool of him, and use, misuse, his enthusiasm for his opportunities and work?

While the Vicar was openly discussing with Jerome the fact that 'Enery 'Arriss's voice was breaking, and that the aitchless youth must be, if not exactly seconded, at least relegated, to the more sparsely occupied men's row in the choir, he was forming the decision that, come what come might, and however much he disliked the course, he must do his Vicar's duty and talk with Bente about that spiritual enterprise which—to say the least of it—had caused Mrs Jones's hash to suffer the deterioration that comes through the postponement of its enjoyment.

'Well, so long!' said the Vicar as he knocked the ashes from his pipe, and departed heavily, noisily, to the work of the afternoon.

CHAPTER V

In spite of the Vicar's decision, it was Gervase himself who raised the question of his mysterious mission. They were in the Vestry after evensong—a dull service which the clergy generally had to themselves and at which they talked Psalms—verse by verse in turns—at one another.

Gervase Bente had just hung his cassock and surplice in the curtained recess, their place, and was standing aside to permit the Vicar to do likewise, when he said:

'The time has come for me to consult you—to make my report to you about——'

'Glad to hear you say so, Gervase,' the Vicar broke in heartily, testifying to the eagerness with which he wished to settle the matter that, willy-nilly, had been raised by the abused and abominable anonymous letter. 'I've been wondering. Let's have it out here.'

Bente was amazed and impressed; he was also, in a flash, troubled by the rapidity with which Mr Richards had caught him up. He opened his dark gray eyes with the stare of blank surprise.

'Then you know! How can you know?' he asked, bewildered; and at the same time turned a wooden chair, which always stood beside the plain vestry table, in order that his superior might sit.

'My dear Bente,' the Vicar answered him, with a deliberation due rather to indecision how to reply than to anything else. 'It is my duty to know all that goes on in the parish.' Having so said, and at once feeling an unconscionable prig for making such an utterance, so evasive and cock-sure, he promptly sat down on the chair, and motioned to Gervase to make himself comfortable on the iron chest in which the church registers were kept.

'I wonder how much you know!' said the curate pensively.

The Vicar smiled in a non-committal manner.

'You may as well tell me all,' he said. 'Go on. I've got to call at the workhouse before we go home. The Master wants me to drive Christian sense into some old Daddy's noddle. Proceed, Gervase, proceed! Now to the—damsel'—he approached with caution—'of Alma Terrace?'

'You certainly are more observant than I imagined,' Gervase confessed.

'Perhaps!' said the Vicar, as he thought of the foul scrap of paper that Arthur Jerome in his righteous indignation had destroyed. 'Go on!—and I want a pipe badly.'

'I will be as frank with you as the delicate affair allows,' Gervase proceeded cautiously. 'I have not absolute freedom to talk, because the—penitent bound me to certain promises.'

'Did she! . . . H'm! I see!' The Vicar watched him with thoughtful eyes. To his open ingenuous nature that smelt suspicious.

'Let me make it clear why I am consulting you.' Bente looked at the floor to avoid distraction and in order that his words should be as judicious as possible. 'It is a matter of discipline. I am pledged—I have pledged myself—to this task, this fight; but I want you, as you are my chief and superior officer, to be aware of what I am doing in your parish.'

The Vicar smacked the table beside him heavily with the flat of his hand, causing the glass-covered water-bottle to rattle.

'If that's the spirit of this talk,' he declared, 'we'll waste no more time on it. I thought you wanted counsel, not the unsympathetic sort of thing you seem to be asking.'

'I must be expressing myself badly.' The curate, lost in contemplation, bit a knuckle of his left hand.

'Go ahead!'

'I do, of course, want your counsel; but I chiefly want to put myself straight with you. Nothing now that you can say can put me off the vow I've made; but I don't want to go in for this big thing without some sort of authority from you.'

The Vicar was becoming impatient. He loathed preambles and preludes. He wished to be at once in the thick of things; he was the sort of warrior who would be killed at once in the heart of the mêlée, whereas to stay at a distance and snipe would be the more discreet, and, therefore, perhaps the more valuable thing to do.

He took his pipe from a pocket, tapped the bowl against his boot, and placed it on the table.

While Gervase was speaking and still ordering his thoughts, he had to stare at it, that instrument of sacrifice for shag. He knew why it was put there. It was (presto, the metaphorical transformation!) a spur to the halting steed of his confidences.

He plunged.

'This girl is a sister of Mary Magdalen. She has sinned and she has suffered.'

'Of course! How did you meet her?'

'In the streets. I was coming home by the docks, and she accosted me. She looked so pale and fragile, so—so superior to her life of degradation that I felt sorry for her, and—I reminded her of the Magdalen.'

He looked with saddened eyes at the Vicar, who realised then more than ever he had done before, the sincerity and the purity of this man.

Richards said nothing. When his curate looked away from him he quietly took his pipe from the table and slipped it into his pocket.

'Go on, Gervase. Speak right out. Trust me. I am here to help.'

'Thanks, Vicar; I never doubted you. Well, she seemed touched and sorry—perhaps ashamed. I hope so, anyhow. I persuaded her at once to go home, with the promise that she would go straight home.'

'You gave her some money, I suppose?'

'Well, yes. I had to. Do you not realise, Vicar,' he flamed out, 'the absolute desperation of these poor creatures? There is nothing but the sin of the gutter between them and death!'

'I do, I do,' answered the Vicar very gently; and Bente, a little ashamed of his outburst, controlled his easy excitement.

'That was some weeks ago. I have since seen her frequently; and have every reason and satisfaction to know that she is repentant and striving to live virtuously.'

'What is her name?'

'Ellen Parker. She is not ill-connected, I understand. Her father was a colonel in the Indian army. He died, and she was left alone, or in that worse than loneliness, the charge of indifferent relatives; and became a governess. She went from place to place, earning next to nothing a year, and at last was —taken advantage of . . . There is nobody so helpless as some of those poor independent girls; they——'

'I know.'

'She was turned out of the house, with but a few shillings in her purse. Oh, the charity of the Pharisees ——!' He clasped his hands in the trembling anger of a splendid indignation against those who are merely formally good.

'Gently, Gervase!'

'I beg your pardon! She had no one to turn to— I suppose it's the same old story in her case as in many. Her relatives, true to pattern, turned their backs on her. You see she was not respectable now. What could the end be in these days of the economic dependence of women, when their wages generally are not enough to——'

The Vicar interrupted him. He looked back at the clock which ticked with hideous loudness over the brass cross above the fireplace.

'My time is very limited. Tell me the essential facts of this poor girl,' he said. 'We can discuss the economic circumstances of the case at another time. The thing is, how are we to help Miss Parker—I suppose she's a Miss—and how to help you.'

'Help me?' Bente was surprised.

'My dear chap, yes. Don't you realise that you may be the tool of a very designing woman?'

Gervase shifted impatiently. He was prepared to speak again, to speak with warmth, with heat; but the Vicar rapping the table beside him with his knuckles impelled him to remain silent.

'Listen to me! Ellen Parker may be all that you say she is—she may indeed be the victim of cruel conditions and the viciousness of some unprincipled man. She may, on the other hand, be just the reverse; a woman—my boy, there are thousands such in this vast Babylon of ours—a woman as prone to vice as a duck to pond-water. Humanity is sometimes a terribly tainted fact; there are girls—it is only common sense to see it—who through the inheritance of tendencies or from innate rottenness—I don't know—can no more help sinning and running after sin than you, my dear Gervase, can resist a spiritually generous tendency. But we will leave that question, too, until some other time—to-morrow, after lunch, perhaps, for it's a fascinating and terrible subject, a condition which we parsons have to face unflinchingly, and realise,

or we are no more good for our jobs than plaster saints would be.

'Let us imagine that this Parker girl is all that you say she was, pure, in the beginning, well-connected, weak, no doubt—ruined by some cursed blackguard. At that point of her life she may have been a saint; as pure in intention, in spite of the fact, as a virgin martyr—as a holy innocent . . . How many years ago was that?' He pointed the abrupt, blunt question with an upraised hand.

'I don't know!' Gervase had to answer.

'No, and for good reason, I suspect. My lady kept to generalities. Ask her when you see her; and don't let her wriggle out of it. Guard against her contradictions. These women——'

'But, Vicar, aren't you judging her after only a partial hearing?'

'Perhaps I am, Gervase. I'm afraid I am.' The Vicar brooded for an instant, and gnawed with his lower teeth the edge of his cropped moustache. 'I don't want to be unfair to the girl. Just the opposite. If I—or you—could really save that soul it would be worth all the years of disappointment and despair which have been practically the whole reward of our work in this parish. St Brendan's would have been a heart-breaking place if I'd been—the delicate sort of clergyman.'

Musing for the moment, he took his pipe and pouch from his pocket and charged the bowl with tobacco. Gervase watched his movements silently, waiting.

'This is the point I want you to be sure of. Suppose it was three years since Ellen Parker was seduced . . . How old is she?'

'Oh, young.'

'Eighteen—twenty—twenty-six?'

He replaced the loaded pipe on the table.

'I can't tell, and she didn't say. She is a worn creature, fragile, frail, pale; certainly not strong enough for the awful existence she has to endure.'

'Suppose it is only a year since she was wronged. Is that too long a time?'

'It must have been longer than that, considering all she has had to go through.'

'Very well; is not that time long enough, with all its experiences, anguish, illnesses, anxieties, remorse and persistent sin—the ruin of youths, the indulgence of satyr-like men—to crush out of her all her finer possibilities, and leave her a desperate, cunning woman, capable of any device to ensnare?'

Bente sprang to his feet. His eyes flashed with a fury of indignation.

'What you say is damnable!' he cried. 'God forgive me for saying that under this roof! But it is the word. You do not know the girl. You are arguing without possession of all the facts. I've seen her. I've talked with her, prayed with her.'

'My dear Gervase,' quietly counselled the Vicar, also rising to his feet and resting a restraining hand on the shoulder of his passionate disciple. 'I may be doing her—and you—an injustice; but I would rather shock you through such an injustice than let you rush into

the worst sort of danger with your eyes open, and yet blind.'

'Forgive me, Vicar!' Bente began to say. His hands trembled.

'My dear boy, there's nothing to forgive. I'm glad to find you are indignant. A champion who can bear quietly imputations which seem to him unjust is likely to be of very poor sort of service to the world. But, speaking quite plainly, you've got to be most careful . . . There is such a thing as blackmail! These harpies—I mean some harpies——'

'It's no blackmail here, Vicar. What I've given the girl, to keep her off the streets, I gave voluntarily. I can well afford it; and she——'

'Did she demur at taking it?'

'She did. I had to argue with her before she'd be persuaded.'

The Vicar shook his head—for his own satisfaction. He had his doubts; but he was not going further this evening to distress this ardent Perseus; though he had very profound doubts as to the character of the chains which fastened Miss Andromeda Parker to the rocks.

'I must go,' he said, 'Purvis (that was the master of the workhouse) will be giving me up; and I mustn't disappoint him. I'll go and see the girl, Gervase; and we'll talk further.'

'Thanks, Vicar; but let us talk further before you call on her. Remember it is my job——'

'Oh, I won't forget.' The Vicar smiled. 'I'm not inclined to make it my job, just at present.'

'I mean that, for good or ill, I'm going to try and save that soul. I'm pledged to it.'

'To her are you pledged to it?'

'No, to myself. I vowed before the altar, during the Eucharist.'

Tom Richards turned with his hand on the latch of the door to look back at him with knitted brows and serious eyes.

'Absolutely pledged?' he asked with a solemnity unusual to him.

'Absolutely! I could not now give it up. I believe she was wronged, and at heart is innocent; and that all her suffering and sin—all that you spoke of—was punishment suffered by her for an offence she was originally not truly guilty of.'

The Vicar seemed about to make an added rejoinder; but he refrained.

'You'll lock up carefully, won't you, Gervase; and see that the West door is properly closed and fastened?'

'I will.'

The Vicar went out. Gervase bolted the Vestry door. He then went into the darkened church; there was only just light enough to see by penetrating the West and side windows.

Obedient to the injunctions of his chief, he went to the West door and tried its fastenings. It was safely closed. He returned to the chancel steps and stood there for some moments in a muse. Suddenly, impetuously, he knelt on the cushioned edge which ran by the chancel-rail.

He spread out his arms, and with a sigh that was nearly a cry flung himself prone.

'My God . . . My God . . . My God!' he breathed with the passion almost of despair. 'Strengthen me! Give me wisdom and strength . . . Give me Thy Grace. O God! . . . My God! . . .' Then in the softened voice which suggests the resignation of weakness after the strain of rare energy, he added, 'Help Thou my unbelief.'

For a little while he knelt there silently, discordantly praying, and breathing heavily. His thoughts had no method or texture. It was his heart that prayed, mutely, appealingly, for strength. It was the kind of prayer, the formless yet effective prayer, which, it seems, may be answered.

He walked home, thereafter, through the darkened streets a rapt and chastened man.

CHAPTER VI

One result of Gervase Bente's bounty was that Ellen or Poppy Parker—'Ellen' was, of course, not good enough for her associates—was able to restore her wardrobe and supply the touches of rouge necessary to disguise with warmth her hollow and sallow cheeks. She won back the sort of self-respect which comes with the consciousness of decent shoes and elegant underclothing. Lack of those foundations of satisfaction—and she had known bad times in the past winter—had made her even more vixenish and desperate than was her wont.

But still this improved condition of affairs did not prevent some pitched battles and frequent unpleasant skirmishes between herself and the slyly meek, occasionally militant, Mrs Barnes.

The two women had come to hate each other with a narrow completeness. Each, with reason, despised the other: each in a way was dependent on the other: this very association of misliking and mutual dependence gave edge to their angers; so that the interior of the basement and first floor of Number 8 was too often like a mean version of a shoddy Pandemonium; and all the comparative self-satisfaction of the exterior of Alma Terrace could not disguise the depressedness

caused by the rancour and rowing of those intolerable women.

No wonder the Terrace sometimes looked deeply dejected. Houses know, and remember. That is where the ghosts come from.

There promised to be something of a pitched battle on the day after that on which Gervase had consulted and confided in his Vicar. The 'dearie' stage of address was past; and the bigger guns were being brought into action, when, despite their growing shrillness, the disputants on the landing outside Ellen Parker's room heard a thunderous volley of knocks on the front door. The two women stared at each other, at once forgetting their common rage and developing insults, in this new interest. The silence was the stranger for the recent turmoil.

'Mr Bente!' whispered Mrs Barnes.

'It was his knock. If you like I'll go.'

'Yes, dearie; I—I'm too upset. I'll get myself a nice strong cup of tea, and if you're inclined to be friendly, as I hope you will, dear——'

'Oh, don't you worry yourself!' Poppy interrupted rudely. 'You'd better clear out of it. Tell me,—do I look tidy? Quick! You—you're a sight.'

Mrs Barnes breathed deeply, intending a sigh; and knew she was a sight.

'Yes,' she answered, 'I feel I am. You look a bit washed out too; but you'll do!' and turning, thudded her way downstairs.

Poppy rushed into her bedroom, looked at herself swiftly, critically, in the glass, dabbed a morsel of

powder on the side of her nose, rapidly changed her shoes, and hurried to the door.

She opened it to—the Vicar.

'Good-afternoon!' said he. 'Are you Miss Ellen Parker?'

'No!' she answered, lying instinctively, and feeling angry at the disappointment following so much fuss. She had no desire whatever to be interviewed by this clergyman or any other than him within whose breast she was confident she had quickened a special interest.

The Vicar looked at her keenly. This young woman was in appearance very like the person he had imagined from Gervase Bente's description, dark, petite, wasted through strain and care.

'Miss Parker lives here, I believe?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is she in?'

'No, she is out.'

'Out!'

'Yes. She is always out at this time of the day. She is a typist.'

'Can you tell me anything about her?' the Vicar persisted. He was not disposed to have come on a fool's errand, accomplishing nothing. 'May I come in for a few minutes?'

Poppy had fully recovered her wits by this time, and was disposed to be rid of this possible inquisitor, at once and for ever.

'I'm afraid you can't,' she answered, with seeming frankness, in a most innocent manner—and when she liked she could look extraordinarily simple and

innocent. 'I have my work to attend to, and there is no knowing when Miss Parker will be back.'

'Is the lady of the house in—Mrs Barnes, I believe?'

'No, she too has gone out, shopping. I am alone in the house and rather busy.'

By this time the Vicar was feeling conscious that the young woman was probably not telling all the truth; though courtesy prevented his pressing her further. If she were lying to him, he must needs accept it as the truth; though why she should wish to lie to him passed his understanding. What was the good of it?

'And it's no use my waiting?' he asked, hesitating what to do.

'Oh, you can wait if you like,' she answered promptly, 'though she may not be in for hours. Mrs Barnes is not only shopping, but has gone to see her uncle in the Limehouse Road. If you don't mind being left alone you can wait in here—but I thought clergymen had a very great deal to do!'

He laughed suddenly. He was caught by the archness that peeped out of her words.

'All right, young lady, I must try again another day. Will you please tell Miss Parker I called? I'm the Vicar of St Brendan's; and say that if she wants to see me I'm at the Vestry nearly every evening at six, and at home pretty frequently in the course of the day. I'd be glad if she'd call. I want a talk with her. Good-day and thank you!'

He turned and went down two of the steps leading to the gate when he stopped. Poppy had just time to

hide the half-grin with which she derided his departing back.

'By the way, may I ask your name?'

She was equal to the occasion.

'Oh, yes. I'm Miss Goodwin. I'm here for a short visit. Good-afternoon!' and she shut the door.

The Vicar marched back to the Clergy House, a thoughtful, baffled man.

'I'd bet a crooked sixpence it was the girl herself. And yet I don't know. She's too clever for me; and as to Gervase . . . If it *was* she, he'll have to pay a pretty penny before he's done with her: and yet—she was not unattractive: she had a sort of simplicity that was likeable. There are possibilities there—perhaps it was not the Parker woman after all—perhaps . . .'

He was still hovering among the perhapses when he won back home, to the masculine converse of Arthur Jerome, and the comparative comfort of tea.

'I called at Alma Terrace,' he told Gervase later in the evening. 'I didn't see the girl . . . Does she wear a black dress and a deep white thingumbob for collar?' he asked.

'Not to my knowledge,' Bente had to confess. 'I've never really noticed what she wore.'

'Has she a brooch like the back of a beetle on a safety pin, you know—greeny?'

'I believe she has.' Gervase stared with his inner eyes at the picture gallery of his memory; 'But really I can't be sure. That sort of brooch is very ordinary and common, I believe.'

The Vicar said little more. He intended soon again to try and interview the witch of Alma Terrace; but in his busily-occupied life with its infinite and varied duties, and many calls, that was an intention more easily determined than done.

As for the ineffable Poppy, she regarded the interview and her own bold duplicity with absolute content. As she was returning to her room she smiled coldly and put out, in derision of the foiled visitor, a pointed tongue. She was proceeding to improve her countenance with the needful chemist-shop accessories when she heard Mrs Barnes thudding her way up the wooden kitchen stairs, and the clattering of inevitable tea-cups.

'The old sow again!' she sighed to herself resignedly. 'I've the patience of a—curate!' and laughed with quiet irony to herself. She proceeded calmly with her toilet, while the landlady knocked with the tea-tray at the door, and pausing a moment for permission to enter, which was silently granted, went in, breathing heavily, but with relief.

'There now!' she said heartily, as she placed the tray on the bed. 'And wasn't it him after all? What a disappointment!'

'No . . . it was a tradesman, a butcher, I think, who wanted Number 2. I sent him there!'

Mrs Barnes looked at Ellen; for a moment her mud-coloured eyes gleamed. 'The imperence!—and came to the front-door. I'm glad I didn't answer it. I'd 'ave give 'im whatfor!—coming up my clean steps.'

Ellen made a wry face at the glass, and took the cup of leathery tea offered her.

'Now we'll 'ave a nice talk,' said the landlady.

'No, we won't, dear; not to-day. I've got a great deal to think of, and I must go out.'

While the young woman decked and tittivated herself, putting on tinkling bangles, and port-wine coloured gloves—little did Gervase know the use that had been made of his benevolence!—she sipped her brew, and the old woman stared and wondered.

'The wicked 'ussy!' were the words, the kernel, of her cruel thoughts.

As soon as Poppy was dressed and had stared at herself critically, backward and frontward, in the glass, preening herself like a love-bird (of the hawk family), she nodded graciously to her reflection. She was at last pleased with herself. She nodded also, and actually smiled, to Mrs Barnes.

'So long, old dear!' she said; and went.

When the front-door was closed, and that huntress of man was gone Mrs Barnes soliloquised. The thoughts and the words are not worth setting down, but they had to do with gullibility and the deceitfulness of human creatures. The landlady was not a whit hoodwinked by the deeds and devices of this young woman, her first-floor back—what landlady ever is hoodwinked when naughtiness is abroad?—but she shut her eyes deliberately, telling herself she was too virtuous to see, and convincing herself, through artfulness and not through reason, that she was too innocent to know. Mrs Barnes could not be guiltless; she traded knowingly on Ellen Parker's vice: she was an accessory, though quiescent, both before and after the fact.

The rent for the room was higher, much higher, because . . .

The next day Gervase called. Mrs Barnes showed him in to the front-room, adjoining that in which Poppy Parker was still abed, absorbed in a novelette.

'She knew it was your knock,' she explained blandly. She beamed on the young man, for she loved the Cloth, and was fully conscious of the mantle of respectability which shrouds every house that is visited regularly by a clergyman. 'She won't be long.'

'Oh, then I can't see Miss Parker at once?' he said in his high tenor voice; and looked at his watch.

'No, sir, not quite at once. She's lying down. I think she's perhaps not quite well,' she added, loud enough for the dear young thing to hear.

He paused and rubbed his chin in contemplation.

'Then I think, Mrs Barnes, I'll call again. There is a family in Bartlett's Dwellings I can go and see. How long will Miss Parker be, do you think?'

'Oh, not long, I'm sure. She'd bustle herself a bit to see a gentleman.' There was a touch of viciousness in these words. Bente did not realise it, though Ellen did, for she smiled to herself, wryly, as she stretched an arm to the adjacent dressing-table in search of a cigarette.

'Twenty minutes,' he asked, 'or half-an-hour?'

''Alf an hour ought to do, I'm sure. I'll tell 'er. I expect she only wants a touch of eau-de-cologner to set 'er right,'—added Mrs Barnes, who knew well

enough that far more than that was needed ere the lady would be ready to be seen.

'Thank you, Mrs Barnes; then tell her, please, I'll be back in about half an hour . . . I'll close the front-door; don't trouble.'

As soon as the curate had gone, Mrs Barnes went to report.

'I heard! I'll get up. Get me some warm water, there's an old dear; and pass me the stockings,'—of which one was lying in the fireplace, the other dangling from the yellow, mottled chest of drawers. She sighed almost luxuriously, while she smoked and thought—thought of things very practical, for this young woman had the business sense passably well-developed, and as much faculty for illusion as would go into an elf's wallet and still leave it somewhat empty.

'I wonder what's 'er game now,' said Mrs Barnes to the black kettle which squatted sluggardly on the cheerless kitchen fire. Well might she wonder; well, too, might Gervase Bente have wondered; for it closely concerned him: but at this stage even the girl concerned had only vague glimmerings of her intentions and determinings.

When the curate returned Poppy herself opened the door to him. She wore a pathetic expression, and smiled wanly. He followed her into the front room. It was just as well for him that the man-of-the-world common sense of the Vicar had left some of its influence behind. Bente was as determined as ever to save this girl's soul—as he put it—and not to give up the quest

while she lived; for even if she failed him and failed him again, failed him for seventy times seven, he vowed he would not abandon her, while, at least, a daily prayer could be offered to Heaven on her behalf. Nevertheless, he was more watchful than was his wont, and disposed to be prudent.

With the quickness of her intuition she realised his mood was subtly modified, and looked at him with searching, experienced eyes.

'I have tried to do what you told me. It is hard; but I will try. I will!'

Poppy, though sometimes false and a liar to the backbone; an actress with a joyous passion for fooling men; was at this moment not entirely insincere. It was a fact, strange to her and not recognised by her, that in Gervase Bente's presence she had a real desire—though that desire was not at all definitely expressed—to be the better woman.

Still, what she had just said was not the truth. He had left with her a written prayer, to be said by her bedside at night. Despite her protestation, she had not tried to say it: her thoughts and attentions invariably happened at the time to be otherwise engaged. Yet, in that present asseveration and promise, she meant sincerely and meant well.

The influence of his personality, with its high purity and devotion, was upon her. She desired, at the moment even ardently, though never quite consciously, not to be unworthy of his confidence and trust, and—still for the moment only—hated the squalor of her hapless, unholy life.

'I am so glad,' he said, as his face lighted up, dismissing the former gravity of its expression. 'To try honestly is half the victory. If you can only accustom yourself to thinking quiet, uplifting thoughts in the moments before you sleep, your whole being must become calmer.'

While he was talking her quick mind was working. The phase of nobler-desiring was already passing, was past, even before he had reached the end of his sentence.

'You have a nice mouth!' she said mischievously. She could not help it. 'I like those curved ends.'

He was shocked. 'Oh, stop that!' he pleaded.

'I don't mean anything naughty,' she protested, with a little pale smile, which, if he had been much older and less in earnest, would have surely touched him—as it was meant to do. 'I am trying, really hard, to be a good girl, and to give up bad ways; but you are human, you know, and so am I, and you are—I must say it, you really must let me,—well, rather good-looking.'

He rose, in a panic.

'Please, please, Miss Parker; don't talk to me like that! I know I'm human; and it is because my human heart is touched that I want to help you, and to save you from the—from the degrading infamy in which you have lived. Do be serious: do let me have confidence that you are serious: otherwise, how can I help you?' All was spoken with a panic earnestness and haste.

'I am sorry, Mr Bente.' She looked down at the folded hands in her lap and felt for the moment truly

impressed by his earnestness and regardful of his care for her interests. 'But you must be patient with me. I have been bad, I know it: but I was made bad. If I had not been very unfortunate, very poor and unfortunate, and in want . . .'

She looked up at him with beseeching eyes—there may have been in them a touch of tears; and knew she had not pleaded in vain.

'Yes,' he agreed, and his voice was gentle. Its tone was of the nature of a spiritual caress. 'You have had a time which would have crushed any one. I pity you —I pity all poor girls in your case: from the depths of my heart I do.'

He was very young in experience of this ugly chapter of existence; but his heart was a large one and his mind and wits not those of a fool.

Moved by his words, she was of a sudden bitterly sorry for herself. She pitied herself with all the weight of her colossal egoism. She saw herself the maiden martyr, paying the price demanded by modern Babylon; and almost wept at the penalties that womanhood must bear.

'It is hard to escape,' she confessed. 'You may give me these little exercises of praying, and so on, I know you mean well by them; but they are straws.'

'It is the beginning; they will grow stronger,' he urged.

'But passion is stronger still. Oh, Mr Bente, let me be frank with you. I often want to be good, I want to be better now; but it is so hard. In the beginning when I was—wronged, and found out, and dismissed from my situation—chucked out with not even two

decent rags to my back, such help as yours might have saved me. . . . By God, it might!'

He, in his impressibility, was too moved by her words to interrupt, though the concluding objurgation jarred his nerves.

'But there was no one—absolutely no one—to help. All the good women I knew were the hard kind who would think themselves lost in virtue if they gave a helping hand to the poor creature who had fallen. There wasn't a word of true sympathy given me, all the time—really there wasn't!—or of real help; only texts and gush about the pure in heart and all that sickening stuff.'

She glared at him with angry indignation, as though he were the concentrated expression of the righteous and the virtuous and the Pharisee. He was watching with such grief and sympathy of affection that she forgot for the instant the part she was sincerely playing; and was inclined to burst out into the laughter of hysteria.

'If I'd met you in those early months, when I remembered my father and thought of the shame he would have been feeling, I might have remained a good girl, and married a decent man—if there are any! —but the clergy and the ministers, the parsons and the hypocrites, passed me by like those fellows in the Bible, the good Samaritan, you know!'

'Please don't speak like that; you only spoil your good case,' he counselled.

'Do I? I suppose I do; but what does it matter if I do spoil my case? You have helped me—I don't want

to hurt you: but you'd better realise the hopelessness —yes, the hopelessness—of helping me.' She showed for the moment the mien and aspect, the abandon, of despair; partly deliberate pose, mainly unaffected sincerity.

'I refuse to believe there is any such hopelessness,' he declared, and the confidence with which he spoke was strengthening.

'My Go— my Gracious—I nearly said it! You are a good—good fellow. Don't give me up, Mr Bente, if any one can save me, you can.' She put out her hands towards him. 'You won't desert me, will you?'

'I won't!' he said with glad emphasis. 'I will never desert you—never, while there's a chance of helping you.'

'Thank you—I think that only you can save me—'sh!' she paused. 'I believe that old cat's listening.' She rose and hurried to the door, opened it, and peered into the passage; finding no one there, she rushed impulsively into her room, the door of which was ajar. Then she heard the creaking of the kitchen stairs.

'Mrs Barnes,' she said in a cruel, cold, cutting whisper, 'if you eavesdrop again, you dirty mess, I'll gouge your sneaking eyes out.'

'I wasn't listening,' the other whimpered; and now her feet thudded as usual, as she fled ponderously to her fortress below that flight of creaking stairs.

'You liar, you were! Don't you come up again while my friend is here: or I leave your lousy house to-morrow—and not pay you a farthing!'

She watched the landlady shuffle into her own particular seclusion, like a gross spider returning to the

sanctuary of its web, and then re-entered the room. Gervase was standing a figure of concern and distress. He was hurt by her sudden change to passionate vindictiveness after such a soul-searching confession and appeal as had been interrupted. She saw the difference in him but misread the cause.

'The sneak was listening; but she's not listening now!'

'I had better go,' he said gently and hurriedly. 'I am sorry we were interrupted. You are not in the mood for more counsel from me—to-day at any rate.'

'No,' she agreed. She knew she was not.

'Be patient with your landlady,' he charged her. 'Even that may be a part of your probation. I dare say she is anxious about you, and concerned for you.'

'Not she—the old limb!'

'Hush, my dear girl. Be careful, be brave.' His appeal touched her wandering moods. She felt on the sudden a pathetic object again.

'I can see it's no use our talking further to-day; but come to the Clergy House, or to the Vestry, we can talk there as well, and it would be nice for you to kneel in the church for a little while. I want you to come to the altar and to pray with you there.'

'Will that old Vicar be there?' she asked shortly.

He stared at her, and she remembered. She smiled to recover his confidence.

'He called here yesterday to see you.'

'I know he did,' she answered promptly.

'Did you see him?'

'No, I was out. But, Miss Goodwin, a friend or relation of Mrs Barnes, saw him. She told me!'

He tested her once more. He felt it was his duty to do so.

'You sometimes wear a brooch, don't you, with a beetle-back?'

'Do I? Why do you ask?' she inquired with pertness to hide her sudden anxiety. It was on the tip of her tongue to be rude to him, though at the same time she was glad she was not wearing that ornament now.

'Forgive me!' was all he said and then went on. 'I am sorry we were interrupted; but it spoilt the confidence we were finding, and we couldn't have got on so well thereafter.' He took her hand: she wondered mischievously—imps were always prankish in Ellen Parker's brain—whether she might squeeze his fingers; but decided she had better not.

'Try: don't give in. It's worth while making a fight for it. A good woman is God's greatest blessing to mankind: a woman who has lost her virtue—had it stolen from her—is the most pathetic, and in her loneliness is the most terribly sad.' He looked down on her with pity in his eyes. 'God bless you, my dear!'

He turned and went, and shut the front door behind him with a slam which startled Mrs Barnes out of her brooding.

He's a good chap,' said Ellen Parker to herself, 'a good fellow: it's a rotten pity he's a parson, a great pity. However——'

She gave her mind to some practical thoughts about Gervase Bente. Slowly her business mood came uppermost; and, forthwith, the charm that was her's departed.

CHAPTER VII

It was impossible for Gervase to communicate with Ellen for some days after the interrupted interview, because Lent had come and there was very much now to do in the church and parish; but it was obviously impossible to leave things as they were.

The interview, with Ellen Parker's frankness of speech, had pushed things forward and must be followed up promptly. Hitherto she had been rather a negative object to be helped and saved. She had been sought and looked after by Gervase, who had pleaded with her, prayed for her, won from her plenty of narrative but little confession, and no true wish to be helped in his way. She had told him stories of her past life as often as not false, for she had that gift of invention, when it suited her to use it, which made it impossible even for herself not to believe she was telling the truth. Fiction and fact were inextricably interwoven in everything she said; and the plainest facts, even in her sincerest moments, were to some degree coloured.

But, now, until Mrs Barnes, with her suspiciousness, curiosity, and eavesdropping, had intervened to spoil the occasion, she had gone a far step further. She had begun of her own initiative to put forth feelers, appeals,

for help; and Gervase, in his passion of anxiety to restore her to the company of good women, had regarded the experience on the whole—there had certainly been some unhelpful and discouraging passages—as the most positive promise yet held out that he—and she—were to win. Already in his heart he began to rejoice over that particular one sinner that repenteth.

There was, however, dawning definitely in Ellen Parker's susceptibilities a new idea. She was at times becoming more and really ashamed of her sordid life, because Gervase Bente was a personable man. She liked the flash of his eyes when he was eager, the shape of his nose, the curve at the corner of his lips; his cleanness, his sincerity, his strength. He stood for something new, for something that, with all her brags, she had never yet met in her life; and the very fact that he could make a mission for her, and worry himself about her as he had done, follow her up, plead with her, visit her, had touched that scorched cinder, her woman's heart. No other man could have done this thing. Her trade had taught her sometimes to loathe men, always to see the animal and dishonourable; without forming her views definitely, to regard the whole sex as beastly—now that another man, who was not obsessed with lusts, who was not brutal and greedy and eaten up with vanity, had entered the path she was crossing.

She still lived her life and went her way; was sometimes vicious and vulgar, and, when things went very wrong, was forbidding, for, to be so, at times was in her blood. She still, except in her dressed hours,

kept herself untidy, and her room in a condition of confusion and squalor; but she had, at any rate, learnt a difference, and now realised that this curate, with the clean heart and considerate attentions, was to her exceptional—a man as man ought to be, and not as she had invariably experienced.

To say that Poppy had fallen in love with Gervase is to be several leagues from the truth. She could not fall in love, simply because she had lost, if ever she had possessed them, the necessary illusions. His strength, fitness, and the shining purity of his intentions, could appeal to her, and did so; she liked the confidence and dignity of his bearing, the evident cleanness of his life —yes, even that—and was stimulated, warmed, by the burning ardour of his ideals; though in truth they were to her something more distant than the farthest stars. He was a man whose manhood appealed to her the more, because it was so much finer, stronger, nobler, than the manliness she had hitherto known; but love —even a glint of it—could hardly be the word in her case. She had to learn its elementary alphabet.

Gervase had not called for several days. Not only did that mean that she missed him—a discovery, this, for the spoilt and inscrutable damsel—but she missed the money he had been helping her with. That addition to her ever uncertain income had become rather necessary; not only because Mrs Barnes was badgering her for some arrears of rent and the more expensive luxuries that had been recently purchased to augment the poor cheap things—kippers and stale haddocks, potted meats, fly-blown ham, tongue, confectioneries,

and such—she had fed upon; but for the reason that most of his earlier gifts had gone to buy new and more elaborate clothing, hats, silk stockings, trinkets and trashery.

It was necessary to see him. She missed him, she needed him; he was a welcome foil to her spoilt, unhealthy life. She thought of writing a letter; but the calculating prudence of her tribe intervened. She would call, as he had invited her to do; and, as Mohammed would not come to the peri, the peri must fly to him. . . . But there was the Vicar. It would be perhaps a little embarrassing if she encountered him in the presence of Gervase and he were to recognise and expose her.

She bit her lips and thought. She planned—a female general, a new Hyppolyta, meditating strategy—and came to a decision.

She put on her quietest gown, brought her hair down over her forehead, and bunched it over her ears; touched the outer corners of her eyes with pencil, making them seem longer, and the whole face smaller. She wore no jewellery, being very careful to keep the beetle-backed brooch at home.

'Now, I don't look quite the same. Miss Goodwin has gone back to—Broadstairs,' and she laughed aloud genially.

Mrs Barnes, hearing the laughter, said to herself, 'Some devilment!'

'If I meet Beardy, I'll try and alter my voice; but no, I won't, he's only a man. He wouldn't notice much; besides, if necessary, I could say Miss Godwin

—was it Godwin or Goodwin?—was my cousin. But I had better not tell a tarradiddle—as I'm going to church.' Again she laughed to herself, settled an oldish hat very staidly on her unstaid head, and sallied forth to conquer the ordained.

There were lights within St Brendan's, and the drone of voices. She crept within the church porch and pushed slightly at the heavy Western door. She peeped within the church, and after a moment closed the door.

'Ugh! Religion is the dreariest! Why do the fools make it so dismal?'

While she was putting into words of thought these critical reflections, a man, a passer-by, stopped a moment at the entrance to the porch to strike a match and light his pipe. He was making 'an umbrella of religion,' using it to guard his necessary flame from the surly blast. Poppy made eyes at him, she could not help it; but eagerly interested in his match he did not notice her, and went on his way undazzled and uncaught.

For a moment she wondered, was it worth while? And then the unusualness of this adventure appealed to her; its prospects amused her, and spurred her on. At the worst it would not harm her, and she wanted to see Gervase. The service droned on—as it seemed to her. Patience was not one of Ellen's virtues, and under the uncomfortable conditions of the draughty porch on that fitly Lenten evening she was very well-disposed to let Mr Bente be—that was her aspect of his moral crusade—and go back to her dirt and her doom. The inclination was merely momentary. Material

considerations recurred. His money, which paid the immediate price of her salvation, brought her genuine satisfaction and comfort; and the man himself appealed to her, piqued her, at once stirred her womanhood and quickened the slumbering sloth of her better nature.

With her, to decide was to act; or rather to decide was already to have acted. She saw that Gervase was alone in his place in the chancel conducting the service; and suddenly felt the need to impress him by attendance at church. She opened the door, went in, shut the door with rather a jar, not intended, and sat on the innermost seat of a row of cane-plaited chairs, under a stuttering gas jet.

Gervase Bente, in the earnestness and vision of worship, did not see her; but many of the sparse congregation scattered about turned to look at the stranger and forgot the call of the service—if they had ever truly hearkened to it—in their curiosity about this damsel with the painted eyes.

She sat all the while. Whether the people in the course of the service rose or knelt, she remained seated, staring at Bente's distant, bowed, and surpliced figure, and feeling most heavily bored. She yawned, yawned a second time with noise; and, to fix her wandering interest, took a hymn-book from the ledge before her, and while she stared without reading at the large-type print, thought the many jostling thoughts of her abounding worldliness.

When the service was ended she watched the people go out, and stared at them pertly, because they stared

—blankly—at her. She waited a few minutes while a sleek-headed verger in a black cassock and with a countenance hardly as spiritual as might have been expected from his high ecclesiastical office, fussed among seats and turned out gas jets.

When at last this business nearly ended, he was coming importantly to inquire why she waited there —where the British Public was not expected to be, except at the advertised hours—she rose, and started to walk towards the chancel, in order to go to the Vestry the way that Gervase had gone.

He stopped her with a large, arresting, soiled, official hand.

'And 'oo do you want?' asked he, with a touch of the volume of Bumble.

'Mr Bente,' she answered.

'Then you'll be kind enough,' he said in a whisper that was very important, 'to go out of that door and turn to the left; and then turn down by the letter-box, and go down the fust to the left again, and you'll see at your left 'and—provided you've got a left 'and—a lamp—marked——'

'Don't be a damfool!' she said shortly, and walked, with nose in air up the aisle, leaving the cassocked ass aghast.

She found the way easily enough, and then received a shock. The three clergymen were in the Vestry, busily talking, while Gervase Bente was donning his decent coat of black. She was surprised at finding so many, and they were more than surprised at the appearance of Ellen; had she been a real live ghost, an

apparition all shivery and gory, a slithery spook with a death's head and draggled sheet of white, she could not have wrought more amazement and disturbance than they showed, when she came the passage-way women never went, except on the miserably-festive occasions when they signed a register.

With a flash of an eye she had realised that the Vicar was there, and with the intuition that is cousin-german to genius, determined to lay particular siege to him. The difficulty of convincing him appealed to her. It cheered her. She loved a fight in a tight corner, when it was impossible to run away.

Mr Richards looked at her narrowly and severely, and knew her at once. Gervase seemed frankly horrified. He was knocked of a heap. Her visit thus was the last event he expected. He disliked the public expression of an intimate confession. Arthur Jerome, after the first effects of the bombshell had passed, openly smiled, rather through nervousness than through the humour of it.

Ellen looked at the Vicar; and with the weakness and frankness of the poor, frail penitent, went to him with offered hands.

'I am a miserable girl. I came to church. I want your help!'

She said it actually with sincerity.

At that moment the verger came into the vestry, laid a couple of heavy keys, chained together, on the table, looked with enemy eyes at Ellen, and said:—

'The West door's locked, sir, and the windows are all closed.'

'All right, Clarke,' the Vicar answered crisply, 'Good-night!'

The verger seized his hat and coat, and, without waiting to doff his cassock, hurried out by way of the Vestry door. There could be no doubt as to his opinions of this creature. It was like an anchoret of old—fleeing from the temptations of witches.

'Sit down, and tell us why you came here; and you may also kindly explain why you lied to me that day I called—for you *are* Miss Parker, aren't you?'

She looked up, really surprised. The sternness of his voice had startled her. Here was a man who, according to her standards of men, promised to be gullible, and yet, even after a lapse of time, he had recognised her immediately.

'I say, Vicar,' said Jerome, 'I think I'll toddle.'

'No, Arthur; you may as well wait too. I think'—he hesitated and frowned at the floor,—'I think you may be helpful, and that this young woman would be equal to the three of us;' and so saying, the Vicar smiled not unkindly; and Ellen, quick to discern tendencies, took heart of grace.

She sat on a chair by the fireplace, while the Vicar leaned against the table. Gervase Bente, a picture of gloom, stood beside him. Jerome found a place on the iron register-box and played with its handle, making it rattle intolerably.

'I am Miss Parker,' she said, 'And I am very sorry I was not quite truthful that day. I've often thought of it since. You won't be hard on me, will you, now—now that Mr Bente is trying to help me?'

The Vicar grunted. Again she looked up at him; and he and Gervase saw in her eyes what looked like the gleam of tears.

'I came partly to let you know I was sorry,' she lied, with the feeling of truthfulness. 'I am ashamed. Oh, don't look at me like that! I'm not a beast—I know I've been a beast; but if you knew my life, its hardships, how my father ill-treated me——'

'What?' cried Bente. This was a new detail.

'How I tried to earn my living as a governess'—she went on, ignoring his interjection.

'You *were* a governess?' the Vicar said severely.

'I was; and I was wronged, ruined, and turned out.'

'I know, I know! I've heard that story before——'

She sprang to her feet and looked at him with eyes of stone: if she had had more inches she might have been dignified. All the energy of her temperament, all her innate faculty for acting and for hating, all her sense of revolt against injustice—when she herself—and somehow not only she herself—must suffer it, rose in angry protest. She was furious.

'So that's the Christian clergymen, is it?' she said bitterly. 'Thank you! I won't trouble you any longer; I'm very sorry I came. Good-bye, Mr Bente,' her tone was cold and biting. 'Please let me go my own way, and do not call on me again . . . The roughest man—dock-labourers—in the East End would not have insulted me as this—this gentleman has done.'

'Don't go, Miss Parker!' said Gervase. 'The Vicar wants to help you; don't you, Vicar?'

'I do,' said the puzzled incumbent of St Brendan's. 'I had no intention——'

'Yes, you had! You insulted me deliberately. Because I am—have been——' she faltered.

It was Jerome who came to the rescue of the situation which was growing confused.

'I propose that the young woman tells her tale and that we listen to her.'

Ellen swept a glance at him. Even at that time, when she was playing the part, with complete momentary sincerity, of trampled righteousness and innocence misunderstood, she was impressed by his physique. She liked a strong man. She appreciated force, sinews, breadth, inches; but saw at once, with certain intuition, that this prize-fighter of a fellow was not to be imposed upon; he would not be sufficiently imaginative and sympathetic for her purposes.

'I came here to tell my story. Do you think I like this sort of thing?' she asked Jerome fiercely, with a sudden turn which made him almost start, and then, when she was no longer looking at him, grin amusedly.

'No,' he answered simply. 'Go ahead. Don't mind me!'

'Oh, you!' she answered, and flashed a glance at him; it was very like impudence.

The Vicar scratched his chin of stubble, perplexed. He realised that this creature was too clever and cunning for him. He made no answer to her question; and as she needed an audience, and intended to appeal to the pity of as many of those clergy as were disposed to listen, she put her pride in her pocket—a place

to which, alas, it was frequently consigned—and condescended to talk.

She was deeply sorry for herself. Again the completeness of her egoism helped her, as it had done a thousand times already. There was no question of her self-confidence. It would enable her to overleap any obstacles because it was the kind which could induce men to take all the necessary trouble for her. She was, at once, a conqueror and a parasite; she had the strength that commands and clings.

The clergy prepared to listen to her with particular attention; seldom did their parishioners deserve such attention as Poppy Parker was to receive. She was a personality, had wits, and had those wits working. The wonder was that she ever could have submitted to the degradation she had lived through and lived on; but is not that part of the mystery which causes this earthly existence to be so baffling, attractive, joyous and incomprehensible an interlude of eternity?

Ellen was playing the part of her life, living and enjoying one of the most actual hours of her existence, skilfully angling for the sympathies of these three men, and confident that she was going to win and control them.

She took off the simple woollen gloves she was wearing, so that in her pleading she might use with greater effect the movements of her nervous and eloquent hands. She was an artist born, that was unquestionable; she had the complex temperament and the inspiration, the intensity, the guile—all the guile; and that—just that—was the pity of it.

CHAPTER VIII

'You all know what I am,' Poppy began, speaking very slowly and deliberately, showing she was aware of the seriousness of the case—which pleased her auditors. 'You all know what necessity has brought me to?'

She paused, lest one of them should wish to answer; but no one intervened. They were earnestly interested; for the Vicar at all events, and possibly also Arthur Jerome, realised with Gervase that she was not essentially vulgar, in spite of her trade: but was a person whose past had been spent with some circumstances of refinement. Her accent was good, her manner at present restrained; she spoke as—it may be safely said—no other of the parishioners of St Brendan's was in the habit of speaking. She was just then upon her very best behaviour, minding her p's and q's, and forgetting her d's and b's. She decided, once again, particularly to besiege the Vicar. He was the key of the citadel. He was the one who, to her volatile intent, most mattered. Gervase was already overcome and must not be lost again; Jerome was of no account and did not matter, but the Vicar did matter, and not only because his words might influence Bente. She had lied to him, and he had found her out. It

would be a personal triumph to attach him to her chariot-wheels. Vanity and egoism were too often the wings that impelled the lady's progress.

Everything on this occasion was in her favour, except the pencilled elongation of the eyes. That too evident touch of artificiality spoilt the effect of her appearance of simple poverty, but she did not realise it; and the men were too decent, after they had noticed it, to notice it again.

'I have been naughty and—I have been unfortunate; but never have I been content to be what I am. I have hated it—hated this dependence upon wicked, selfish men; and if I can—oh! this is so difficult! How can I go on talking of my—ways with three men staring at me like this?'

The curates looked at the Vicar: he flushed and was over-concerned at his responsibility. Meanwhile Poppy fastened on him her glittering eyes and felt within herself even then, the spirit of impertinence would out, a latent desire to ridicule; but successfully she resisted the tendency.

'I have come to you freely. Are you willing to help me? I've had no use for parsons until Mr Bente came to my help; the only one who's impressed me at all before him was the rector who, when I was three or four years old, used to give me sweets—because he was making love to my mother.'

'You don't know that!' said Gervase indignantly. 'How impossible you are! Don't say that sort of vulgar thing! How can you know?'

Poppy wrinkled her eyebrows.

'Well, I dare say!' she said, with a simplicity not entirely guile. 'But I know Papa used to storm about the man—it is one of the clearest recollections of my childhood—and I remember he called him—but never mind now . . . Daddy got a sunstroke in India!'

'It was an unhappy beginning!' said Bente, ever her champion when she was not too worldly and impossible. 'Now, please, Miss Parker, be simple and straightforward.'

'Ah, if only you all knew!' She looked round at them; her glance reached Jerome, who was watching her with honest, unillusioned eyes. 'What a fool!' was the thought that flashed through her brain . . . 'My father was a good sort. But the sunstroke did it. His language then, especially if Mamma had been naughty—poor Mamma had a temper too—was mustard. That's putting it politely.'

The Vicar was of a temperament which disliked a waste of words or time. He cut short her tale of old history.

'We may as well let your parents rest in peace. I suppose they are dead,' he said.

'I suppose they are—of course they are,' she recovered herself sharply. 'Mamma died when I was about six. Papa, he was a colonel in the Indian Army, left me to nurses, ayahs and that sort; and he died, and I came to England, and—and here I am!'

'Yes, it is a sad condition for the child of a British officer; but as you are confiding in us you might tell us something nearer to the present. I won't ask you how you became—well, what you are! but how you

propose to recover from it. You want to live a straight life, don't you?'

'I do!' she said, and clasped her hands in her lap.

'And would be prepared to do whatever we recommend?'

She said 'Yes,' but in rather a faltering tone. It was pretty evident to the Vicar, if not to Gervase, that the 'Yes' had a note of uncertainty. He was, however, not the man to be troubled unnecessarily; and, though kind as kindness to Ellen Parker, was disinclined to be easily taken in.

'I'm glad to hear you say so, because if you are to be saved—pulled out of the gutter, don't you know—it's got to be done with your own goodwill. With your own determined goodwill, remember! Drink and the devil will always win unless the individual himself bucks up and backs the people who are helping him. D'you realise that?'

'I'm not interested in drink and the devil,' said Poppy airily, and she looked sympathetically to Gervase.

'It is the same with your sin.' The Vicar was intentionally abrupt and frank.

'Thank you!' Fires of anger smouldered in her dark eyes as she stared back at Mr Richards.

'I don't wish to make it hard for you,' said he.

'And I hate preaching,' she protested.

'Miss Parker, please!' Gervase appealed. Again his intervention checked a process.

'Oh, all right! I suppose I asked for it by coming here!' She stretched out her legs, evidence in her case

of a sulky indifference, showing shoes far too high-heeled, stockings far too fashionable, for the rest of her outer attire. She realised the fact, and at once drew in her feet. 'I ought to have spoken to Mr Bente alone, as I expected to find him. He is sympathetic!'

'So are we, Miss Parker,' protested the Vicar, who was growing impatient, and whose habitually untidy short black hair appeared even more thoroughly ruffled.

'Then don't say such horrid things!'

'But really—we——'

'Yes, you did say unnecessary beastly things; you know you did, didn't he?' she asked Gervase.

'The Vicar,' Bente answered with his best diplomacy, 'is trying to help you. But you won't help him. Do help him—and us; do try. We are here to help you.'

His eyes were lustrous with earnestness. Jerome glanced at him sideways and mentally shook a doubting head. It seemed to him there was something warmer than earnestness in those eyes.

'Of course I want to help you!' cried the Vicar impatiently, and he drummed on the table with his fingers, 'and I think I can do it if you are willing.'

Poppy showed she was attentive.

'Would you go—for a time—into a home——'

'No.'

'Where there are good women, sympathetic, gentle, devoted, who would——'

'I say No—no thank you, Mr——' she paused; she actually did not know the Vicar's surname.

'You had better, believe me, it is the only way.'

'My dear sir,' she said, getting up from her seat and speaking with a fine, careless excited directness. 'If you think I'm going to mew myself up in a goody-goody shop, with tracts and hymns, and cocoa and porridge for high days and holidays and that sort of thing, you are very much mistaken. My God! (it was not spoken as a prayer) I'd rather the——' she paused again. With the tail of her quick eyes she had caught a glimpse of the horror-stricken expression on Gervase's face. She had been going to contrast with the promised prospect of religious sanctuary the easier freedom of the streets; but, almost as speedily as thought she varied the programme—'I'd rather the—horrors of the streets, the cold and wet, the hunger, the sin which alone can relieve the want——'

Gervase interrupted her, with a hand upraised. The Vicar had turned away from her in despair. This was obviously too eloquent, even theatrical, for such an occasion. There was no true spiritual crisis here.

'It would be only for a time!' Bente pleaded. 'There would be no heaviness of discipline to break your heart; only sanctuary in which your bruised spirits could find solace; and with meditation and loving guidance you could make your peace with God. You need such a refuge, you must have it: you can't refuse it and go back to the squalor of this wretched East-End existence.'

'I could try the West End. I had thought of Regent Street,' she said simply and gravely—purposely to shock him. Now she wanted to wound, to strike.

And he was shocked—inexpressibly. So was the Vicar. Both were deeply concerned by what she said; but for opposite reasons: Gervase because of the tragedy, the Vicar because of the unconscionable levity.

'Impossible! You must fight and be brave. You must, you must! You need the company of good women; of such as have suffered in the world and whose presence alone is uplifting and soothing.'

She made a wry face at the medicine thus offered.

'You are a dirty little cat!' said the Vicar bluntly.

'And you——' she began, with fire in her eyes. She was at once transformed to furious spitfire. Oh, the vials of wrath and Billingsgate, the gutter-stench of words, the fruit of terrible experiences, about to be belched forth on Tom Richards' devoted black head, when Poppy realised Gervase Bente's distress. Again with a touch of intuitive genius, the spark of her artistic temperament, even perhaps with a vagueness of kindness, she decided abruptly and entirely to change her tactics. '—You are the clergymen I came to for help.' She spoke slowly, the words were all unconsciously expressive of despair. It was an extraordinarily effective answer. They all—the men and she—were silent for some moments.

Her eyes filled with tears. She deceived herself once again, seeing herself as a lonely, pitiful little person who had gone to the Church for the succour that institution was established to provide; and then, by a priest of that church was mistreated and rejected.

She sat, crouched on her chair, and looked with appeal to Gervase.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Parker,' said the Vicar frankly. 'I didn't want to wound you, but the levity of your remarks and the vile suggestion you made of going to more profitable haunts of vice galled me. I should not have called you what I did; but did you mean what you said?'

Ellen looked at him, still with the pathos of the poor white rat in her expression.

'No—yes—I don't know!' she said with sincerity and a helpful helplessness.

'Then how do you think we can assist you? Here are three of us, servants of God, anxious and pledged by our profession to champion the unfortunate of all kinds. Tell us plainly—answer this—when you came to us for help, how did you expect us to help you?'

Poppy hated these direct questions, which challenged so bluntly her sincerity.

'I thought you might give me sympathy,' she answered, in a small soft voice, 'as Mr Bente has done. I—I couldn't go to a prison-house with nuns and all that sort of thing. I should run away at once.'

The Vicar then for the first time fully realised the fascination and the call of the streets to the women who had become outcast—the lights and the freedom, the excitement of setting the snares, of avoiding the dangers, and the triumph of capturing. In those final words, whatever might be the motive behind them, Ellen had told the truth.

'You thought we might give you sympathy. Tell

me what exactly do you mean by sympathy?' another direct question.

'Don't you know what sympathy means?' There seemed now a touch of temper in her voice. 'If not, Mr Bente——'

'Oh yes, of course I do. But how mere sympathy —words, however kind, without actions and systematised effort behind them—would help you, I cannot for the life of me fathom!'

'Then leave it to Mr Bente. He knows!'

'Do you, Gervase?' There was a smile on the lips of the Vicar.

'Perhaps!' Bente shrugged his shoulders, and was very anxious. 'I hoped we could help this wilful woman——' He paused to emphasise the description, at which Poppy was suddenly inclined to laugh, as was Arthur Jerome; but all managed to maintain their superb solemnity—'to escape from her life of beastliness.' Ellen's sudden inclination vanished at this frank judgment so unusual to him. 'I had hoped and believed it could be done by sacrifice—she should give and try, and others of us must do the same.' Poppy for the moment wondered what exactly he meant.

Gervase was much in earnest now. Proselytising fervour had come to him. He breathed for the measure of moments something of the zeal which animated those whose burning words tore from their scabbards the swords of the Crusaders. He must save her soul alive. In his mystic imagination he had often seen himself offering that tarnished jewel of immortality renewed before the awful glory of the Supreme. If

it meant his death—in his exaltation he had gone to that almost impossible extremity—he must save and not abandon this woman. Not once or twice but many times had these ideas, aspirations, determinations, visited him; they were a part of his mental texture, woven into the strands of his ardent personality; and, therefore, in fact it was not difficult for him to champion verbally this little creature of pathetic whims and irresponsibility, whose volatile emotions and contradictoriness of mood, were the fruit of commingled wilfulness, weakness, and positive abandonment and naughtiness.

'Why don't you treat the Vicar with the confidence you gave to me?' he demanded of her, and then before she could make the invited answer launched forth in his ecstacy.

'We have to save this woman's soul,' he said. 'It will be as the box of spikenard which the Magdalen broke upon the feet of Christ. We who have pledged ourselves to the service of the weakest and the worst cannot abandon this child who has been sinned against as well as sinning. I could not live and work with satisfaction, knowing that she was selling her frail body in a mockery of love, giving herself absolutely to the brutes and the beasts masquerading as men, who lust and ruin. In my heart I have vowed that while I live, be it ever so difficult, this girl shall find in me a friend; and I have confidence that through care and through service and through prayers to Him who in the face of the wrath of men shielded the woman taken in adultery, we shall win. This is our Magdalen'— he turned to the Vicar

with a gesture which implored—'we must not abandon her.'

They all were moved. Ellen was weeping now, shedding silent tears, such as never before had welled from her parched and arid heart. They were genuine tears, and she felt their emotion at the moment. She sorrowed for herself and for all that ruined innocence —her own—that had never been. Her aspect of abandonment to misery, hurrying on the heels of Gervase Bente's rhetoric, moved the Vicar. He felt himself bound to reject the honourable doubts and suspicions that had held him. He was sincerely grieved.

'She had better go now,' he said.

Poppy rose. They saw her face; it was white and wild; the pencilled eyes were in a mess. She was not pretty. Without saying a word she went.

The clergy were glad to be free of her. Arthur Jerome closed the door behind her with decision. All three of them felt self-conscious. There were some almost intolerable moments of strained silence.

'I guess we'd better go and see what Mrs Jones has got for us,' said the Vicar at length, in a jocular effort to drive away the effects of the emotional experience they had just passed through.

Gervase could say nothing. He reached for his wide-awake, and was anxious for the solace of silent self-communion in his room at the Clergy House.

'That girl is a personality,' declared the Vicar, when he had found his hat.

'She is!' Jerome agreed. 'She's a handful. She

was born to make mischief. I've no doubt now of the existence of an active spirit of evil . . . There is one other thing about her of which I have no shadow of doubt whatever.'

The others looked at him.

'What is that, Arthur?'

'She's made up her mind to marry Gervase. That's as sure as—public-houses. Take care, my lad, or the impossible will have happened.'

The Vicar whistled to himself—a long-drawn whistle—as Jerome opened the Vestry door for them all to go out.

Gervase was aghast as he followed. He stumbled blindly into a dark, mad world.

CHAPTER IX

GERVASE was so absolutely aghast at Jerome's declaration, that at ten o'clock of the evening of their fatal discussion, when his last parochial duty—a small confirmation class for bigger lads held at the Clergy House—was done, he felt compelled to walk it out.

Sleep was impossible while his mind was in such turmoil. To marry Ellen Parker . . . the idea was preposterous. For her to have purposed it . . . What could have put such a notion into Arthur's bullet-head?

The suggestion did not frighten him as it would have done a less worldly or a more worldly mortal; but it turned his ideas and plans for the future topsy-turvy and more than upside down. A nightmare version of Ellen's face besieged and haunted him like a witch or a dragon with iniquitous eyes.

He must walk—he must walk to restore himself to discipline. This excitement and fever were like a midnight Brocken, mad with follies and mocking furies.

Without thought of where his feet would carry him, he marched westward, fighting to recover his mental equilibrium, wrestling with inner earthquakes . . . Like a moving panorama in gray, the streets with their passengers slid beside him . . . Looking up he found Big Ben looming over him. He had no

consciousness whatever of how he had got there. The Thames, the lamps, tramcars, policemen, wayfarers, might as well not have been. He could not remember a single solitary incident of that five-mile London march.

The great bell sang half-past eleven, and with the last throb of its semi-chime Gervase realised he was walked to a standstill. The excitement which had impelled him to the end of the Embankment had spent itself. His feet ached. He was physically and mentally weary; but he had found himself. The inner earthquakes were subdued.

As he went back to St Brendan's, the first part of the journey by the Underground Railway, he resolutely put from his thoughts Ellen Parker and the horrible impossibilities associated with her. He read the advertisements on the walls of the carriage for the change and recreation of his mind, and discovered a few ideas and trains of thought about linoleum, soap, and jellies.

The wolves were, however, at him again the moment he awoke the next morning; and he realised then that, though he had slept well enough, his mind had been working at the insatiable problem all the night through.

'It cannot be! It is not possible!' were his outspoken thoughts. He felt shadows of despair. 'Absolutely preposterous!'

The long words made him yawn, and then like the soldier springing to attention he braced himself to discipline, sprang from bed, and knelt at his morning

prayers. Unconsciously, the trend of his petitions was for Ellen Parker, the poor unfortunate whom it was his duty, perhaps his destiny, to save. He was unconsciously convincing himself of her need and of his opportunity and duty.

The prayers done . . . the prospect with a rush suddenly appeared appalling. It was horrible, horrible! His cold bath braced him, but did not soothe his tremulous, haunted nerves. He writhed as he clothed himself. He caught sight of his white, strained face in the looking-glass, and earnestly told his reflection that it could not be. Just now, in the fresh morning sanity, the suggestion seemed peculiarly preposterous. Of what could Arthur have been thinking when he said those foolish words? It was, really, an impossible idea . . . absolutely preposterous!

He heard the Vicar go from his bedroom and stump downstairs. He heard Jerome shout a greeting to somebody and then go out, as he was the celebrant at that morning's early service.

Fred, the bootboy, knocked at Bente's door, to call him down to earth's necessities, and to bring him his shoes. Back again to the world and its mad and bitter problems.

Breakfast at the Clergy House was nearly always a silent meal; especially during Lent, when the men were over-worked and had their minds and hands unusually full of considerations and duties. There was no desire or leisure for small talk. The Vicar looked up from the morning paper which he was reading hurriedly, smiled the busy man's greeting, and went on munching

and reading; while Gervase glad of the silence helped himself to coffee and dry toast.

During the whole of that day Ellen Parker was foremost in the thoughts of Gervase Bente. Whatever his occupation might be, she was at the heart of his anxiousness. He was as haunted by her as though she were his moral shadow, as, indeed, she threatened to be.

Night returned and the oppression grew. He went to bed an over-weary, racked man; and this time could not lose himself in sleep; but spent the horrible hours in alternate panic stretches of wakefulness and dreamfulness through which, with divers distortions and exaggerations, Poppy Parker's swollen and weeping eyes gleamed and haunted and tortured him.

He must face the issue; he must see her. Whatever the end might be he must not shrink from any and all the possibilities confronting him. It might be that marriage was God's way for her redemption and the price that he must pay for the saving of her soul; but the prospect was simply appalling to his shrinking reserve and purity.

There was never a saint in the long calendar of martyrdom who shrank more than did he from the ordeal in promise. . . . Already, it will be seen, the choice—though absolutely preposterous—was in process of being accepted, and he was preparing to do what, according to Arthur Jerome, Ellen expected of him.

It was, in truth, the pain, the ugliness, the acute horror of the venture that especially called to his ascetic disposition. During those days of mental

stress and nervous strain he fought against, and came nearer to, the acceptance of the bitter needs of his duty.

Marriage had always been an ideal he had preached and praised—for others. He recognised it as a privilege, and accepted it as a necessity for the economy and the purification of the world—but not for him; no, never for him. He had regarded himself as set aside—as fully as were the Levites in the Old Dispensation—to a dedicated life, in which the charms of the Cottar's Saturday Night, of weans and of wife, could not occur. . . .

He must see Ellen. That was the inexorable necessity. There was no question of avoiding her. He must talk with her and not let her feel that he was deserting the purpose he had voluntarily taken up. . . . The nightmare aspect of her had gone . . . He had come to see her now in her real pathos—at the other extreme; the crushed poor girl whose shame and suffering gave her a claim on those whose privilege it was to be able to help and to save . . . Here was his opportunity, he saw it now as clear as Christian print.

He sent a note to Ellen to prepare her for his call on the following Monday afternoon—it would be Easter Monday—and when the hour of his destiny had come walked to Alma Terrace prepared for the worst. He had not given either of his colleagues an inkling of his intention; his aunt, who, more than others, had hitherto shared to some extent his purposes, was equally in the dark. And why not? This was his

concern and Ellen's, nobody else's. So, as always, the fool smooths the way for his folly.

She was ready for him.

Mrs Barnes admitted him with an air of enormous solemnity. She might from the ceremonial gravity of her manner have been a pew opener at a funeral, or a thrice woefully-wedded woman prepared to celebrate her fourth nuptials. The organised melancholy of her mottled face brought Gervase's spirits still lower; until reaction supervened and he roused himself to play the man. He reminded himself that he must not wear the mask of gloom, that he was bound to face his difficulties cheerfully; so he beamed on Mrs Barnes and greeted her with more than his wonted warmth. His effort was of no avail.

She shook a heavy head, causing a greasy gray ringlet to become detached from the rest of the mess of hair and to flop by the side of her ear like a degraded pendulum.

'What's come over that dear young lady, I don't know!' she said with uplifted hands and piercing shrewish eyes. 'Moping and sighing, and sobbing, and no more appetite than a spadger in a cage.'

'Is she—is she miserable?'

'Miserable, Mr Bente? She's a very—a very—I don't know what to call her—so different from her usual self. You come in 'ere, sir, and I'll prepare her for your visit. Poor dear young lady!'

With the velvet steps of a funeral relative the landlady crept out of the room, and Gervase was left to

his own depression. He stood gazing through the soiled window at the murky street; and from the depths of his soul suffered because of the prospect before him.

He heard the door open and turned to greet Ellen. She was unquestionably a thing of sorrow; his heart went out to her in a great swirl of pity. He was nearer to loving her then than he had ever deemed it possible to be. He took her hand and led her to the rusty arm-chair with the green wool antimacassar by the fireplace.

There was no deceit or fraud about the young lady at this hour. She was obviously genuinely, supremely miserable; and the last of his suspicions went like an icicle thrown in the fire.

She was dressed simply and neatly. Her face with its sallowness and pallor had none of those helps from the arts which had shown so plainly during the Vestry interview, and had there betrayed her. She was a truly pathetic object, making full appeal to his large reserve of pity.

He took a seat opposite her.

'You are not well,' he said.

She looked up at him with the darkened eyes of past weeping, shook her head for 'No' and said: 'I'm very unhappy.' She gazed at him earnestly, and in her emotion and seriousness was certainly not attractive. Had she used any of her arts, given way even for an instant to her natural instinct to hunt men, he might have escaped; but the truth of her sorrow and shame, or the higher instinct which kept her from the mistake of her life, restrained her from

practising, even unconsciously, any of the wiles of her profession.

'Why?' he asked, not knowing well what to say, yet aware that it was his task to break silence and come to an understanding with this very human enigma.

'Oh, Mr Bente, you know!' she answered, with some touch of reproach in her voice. 'You must know that it is difficult for me to talk as—as I talked in the Vestry. Do you not pity me?'

'From my heart I do!' he replied, and leaned over in the earnestness of his sympathy. Her heart gave a bound. The old instincts were called to work again, but she held them in leash.

'Thank you!' she said, with dark eyes open wide. 'Don't wait, Mrs Barnes, thank you!' she called out in a more direct voice, and was silent for a minute; while no doubt the anxious landlady slipped quietly back to her lair and backwater below. There was no insolence in Poppy's voice this time; but, as Gervase noted to himself, a new dignity, a sign to him of regeneration and grace. It pleased him—fatally: it comforted him; he did not feel now that the task before him was so difficult, so dreadful.

'I want to help you, as you know,' he said to her, and the tone of his words emphasised their sincerity; 'but how? That's the problem!'

She shook her head silently, and a sob—it was certainly a true one—escaped her.

'Come, cheer up! We've got a battle before us. We'll fight it together. Tell me your inmost thoughts.

As I said in the Vestry, I'll stand by you as long as you let me do so.'

She reached out a hand and touched his. He did not take it, but waited for her to speak. She knitted her brows, and thought.

'If it had not been for you I—I should have drowned myself. I feel sure I should. What is there to live for? I'm so tired of life.' She spoke with the accents of sorrow, only just this side of despair. Her eyes were now fixed on the paper-screened fireplace. as though she wished to keep her thoughts centred on their one object. 'I know I've done wrong, wicked wrong; I knew it when first I met you, and knew—found—there was one good man in the world. The others are—such hogs.' There was a touch of passion in those ultimate words. She paused; he did not make any comment. There was nothing for her to do but continue.

'It is hard for such a one as I'—she fetched a sigh, and Gervase felt the tears at the back of his heart —'to get up again when once we have fallen.' The words seemed to come with difficulty. 'The good people are all against us. I did not know how hopeless it was till after I had met you, and I saw the miles between us—morally.'

'Hush!' he said. He disliked this implication of praise, which was beyond the last thing he desired to hear from her, or any one, at any time. 'Talk of yourself and your own hopes, my dear girl. Forget me. I am not so good;—Heavens, how well I know it!'

She had the wit, as well as the good feeling, not to

protest against his modest assertion. She still had the wit.

'It is this, Mr Bente. I want to live such a life as I might have lived if—my start in life had been better. I really didn't have a chance, Mr Bente.'

'I know,' he said.

'I was an ignorant girl, and once gone astray, I could not get back again. If you will help me now, I will be good. I could not help being good, because I hate—I *hate* this horror.' She drew back in her chair and hid her face in her hands. She trembled. At this display of emotion Gervase rubbed his lips in perplexity and felt completely out of place. He waited.

'What I want, Mr Bente, is to get away from London into a quiet country home where there is refinement —books, flowers'—she looked, it seemed, almost helplessly, about the room; he realised the contrast! —'and love. Only to be loved! I thought I knew what love meant; but now I know I never did: not true love. Oh, to discover that would be worth dying for!'

Now she looked at him with fearless and enthusiastic eyes. This was a nobler woman than, even at the most charitable, he had deemed. The thoughts of his intentions were clothing themselves with words at the back of his brain; but he kept them in check. Instinctively he shrank from taking the fatal step.

'To be with good people—not too religious, not the religious people who are so hard on the weak and the unfortunate, not the people who make such a noise singing, but the quiet, good kind, who don't worry and

fuss;—and I might be helpful too. Who knows, but after a little while, Mr Bente, after I have proved I can be worthy, I might perhaps help poor girls who have been mistaken, to——' She ended her sentence there.

'Bless you!' he said enthusiastically. 'Those are the very words I hoped you might speak.'

She smiled for the first time in that interview, and for the first time for weeks he felt positively happy.

'I think we shall win,' he said.

'Then you will help me—to gain all that?'

He moved his chair over, and took her hand.

'My dear, my dear Ellen,' he said, and his seriousness startled her, though of course she was not unprepared, or indeed the kind of woman ever to be actually surprised at anything. 'I wonder if you would be disposed—be inclined—willing to give me the right to guard you always. I mean, my dear, not as a clergyman; but—er—as a husband.'

She had cast down her eyes, and was trembling; he could feel the tremors of the hand he was holding.

'I don't see why you should not be a clergyman's wife,' he went on, almost fearfully. His heart was not in this business, after all.

She looked up at him, and realising that he had not yet done speaking, remained prudently silent.

'You have, I am convinced, been more sinned against than sinning. You were weak, ill-treated, inexperienced, unwise, tempted——'

Poppy fidgeted. Her worse nature was getting awake again. He was suggesting that she had fallen a victim

to temptation, whereas she was feeling at this present the ill-used innocent, the wounded lamb who bravely was endeavouring to escape from the maws and claws of those iniquitous wolves, men.

'You hadn't a fair chance, I am sure of that, and I will give it to you.' She sidled closer to him. 'As my wife you will face the world anew, and together we will work for the lost and the unfortunate. Tell me, will you?' He left it at that. His appeal ended with a broken sentence spoken in a broken voice: for although his words were calm and chosen the manner of his speech had been emotional enough.

Poppy was touched by the very unevenness of his speech. He had found the chord of sympathy which trembled throughout her. For the time being her selfishness was lost. She responded to his feelings and was almost as moved as he.

'You are doing a dangerous thing,' she said. She had to say it.

He pressed the hand he was holding, and said thoughtfully:—

'I think those words prove it is not so dangerous. You are, I believe, a good woman at heart, I could not desert you now.'

No conventional, ever-expected word of love. None of the expressions which should be essential to a proposal of marriage. She, womanlike, noticed the omission, and must refer to it.

'But you do not love me,' she said softly.

'Love you?' He put down her hand and stared at her. 'My dear Ellen, of course I love you.'

'As—as a clergyman, yes,' she suggested.

She was subtly leading him into depths he had not anticipated.

'If you believe I ask you to marry me only as a means of saving you, you are mistaken,' he said, quite wrongly, for he, too, was not unnaturally deceiving himself just then.

'Is that true?' she asked, and leaning over she took his hands and looked up earnestly into his eyes.

'It is true, Ellen, I love you. I want you to be my life-companion, my helper in Christ's work. We will go away to a quieter parish where there are—what is it you asked for?—flowers and books; and where ideals can live. Yes. I will take you from this squalor. You shall go to where you can win health again, and be what you were meant to be, one of God's good women.'

There were tears in her eyes now, or they shone as if there were. She knelt impulsively and, in a moving silence, hid her face on the hand she was holding.

'Come—come, my dear!' he said awkwardly, and raised her. She expected him to take her in his arms, but he did not. He helped her to her feet and she hid her face against his shoulder. Gervase was growing embarrassed. He had not been prepared for scenes. He had not remembered that a proposal of marriage is not quite as sober and solemn and indifferent an affair as, say, putting up the banns.

'You haven't even kissed me,' she reminded him, and looked up with waiting lips.

He did not like that. It gave a jar. Despite his words he was still an ascetic; he had truly no wish

to kiss her, but realised vaguely that he must make some concession to the supposed conventions. He held her arm, and kissed her nervously, yet placidly, first upon the cheek and then upon the forehead. They were such kisses as the Early Christians might have exchanged, the ancient kiss of peace.

Such evidence of physical coldness at a time of personal crisis, suddenly, violently turned Poppy against him. New feelings and old surged in her passionate breast. She felt that she despised him; while he, conscious somewhat of the turmoil that seized her, believed that, through his indifference, he had wounded her.

'You fool!' in her thought she condemned him. 'I will always love you, Gervase,' after a pause, she said aloud, and, dropping the hand she had been holding, without more ado returned to her room at the back. She was changed, thrown back, was once more a calculating vicious woman, where so little a while before had been what seemed a passionate, exultant creature of human flesh and riotous, pulsing blood.

CHAPTER X

THEY were married in June.

The only persons present at the ceremony in St Brendan's were the Vicar, who tied the knot, Arthur Jerome, who acted as best-man, Miss Bente, the bridegroom's nearest relative, and Fred, the bootboy, who grinned most of the time because he had been combed, dressed, and decked with the white flower of the occasion. He felt the particular solemnity of the service, as did they all; so he grinned.

Mrs Jones had prepared the wedding-breakfast; probably the most ambitious, execrable festive-meal organised by any one (their neglecting it was ascribed to fullness of heart;) and the bride's health was drunk in Australian claret.

Poppy was secretly annoyed that her hosts had not sprung to champagne for the occasion; but she showed only geniality and sweetness. Outwardly she was the loving little wife, born to be the comrade of her husband; and at present, during this novel, inimitable day, truly believed herself so. Through the months that intervened since his proposal, she had grown used to the calmness of Gervase's wooing, and was really intending to make him a proper helpmeet.

As to his aunt, Miss Bente, what she thought of

the prospects of the quixotic marriage she kept secret to her gentle and reserved heart. Hers was the saddest face of the occasion; the others were openly happy, though the boisterousness displayed by Arthur Jerome and the Vicar was accompanied with inner anxiety. They could see no prospect of smooth sailing for the ship of marriage that was launched that day; and to add to their disquiet, they were losing the companionship of Gervase—which meant much to them and to the parish; so that their natural boisterousness was, perhaps, rather more evident because of the feelings it was meant to disguise.

The honeymoon was spent in Paris: an enjoyable time to them both. Gervase had made up his mind, now that he was of the Company of Benedick, to take a real holiday and to ensure that Poppy (though never did he use that name, it was always 'Ellen' with him) should find as much happiness as possible. She was very well disposed to the same end; and so they went through the first critical stage of married life with full sails set before a golden breeze. There was no hitch in the whole fortnight. The novelty of the experience kept her good. Paris had always been to her something of a vague wonder-world, rich with the promise of alluring pleasures: and here she was at the El Dorado of worldly dream—in the company of a curate.

She was undeniably happy, and was careful to make herself undeniably charming; so that Gervase was easily able to forget the serious purpose for which he had married her. Being in a foreign country and with ears unused to the rapid French of Paris—though she

had her inevitable schoolroom smattering—she tended to draw close to him and to realise how much more there was in him, and that alluring and attractive, than she had imagined. There was nothing to cloud their honeymoon or destroy his illusions. They were as children rejoicing; she had put aside her worldliness, the hawk was forgotten in the turtle-dove; and Gervase could not but feel warm gratitude in his heart as he realised how winning was the little woman who was given to him.

His feeling for her was still rather protective than anything else. She was, in those days, trusting to him, depending on him; and he was man enough to feel flattered through the fact of her sympathetic dependence.

That fortnight was unquestionably the happiest period of Gervase Bente's life. They lived laborious days of many expeditions and delight. From their hotel by the Odéon they went on pilgrimage to holiday and history places. Ellen was cordially willing to be guided by her man. She did suggest a visit to the Moulin Rouge, of which she had heard a little and imagined much and he had heard less and imagined more; but that was the only effort she made to visit the demi-monde of the dazzling city. Gervase had decisively said 'No,' and she, enjoying the restful experience of life in a comfortable hotel, was well content.

They visited all the sights that were easily available; did Longchamps on a race-day, St Cloud, Versailles and the Trianons—they sailed in a trumpery gondola

on the lake at the bottom of the *Tapis Vert.* For one long day they went to the Forest of Fontainebleau and were lured into enduring déjeuner expensively, on little more than siege rations, at a pretentious hotel in Barbizon. The fact that Millet and the painter Rousseau had worked, and Louis Stevenson had stayed, in the grasping village was no compensation to those hungry, vivid mortals for the niggardly fare. Anyhow, it was only for twelve hours, and they enjoyed themselves climbing among the boulders, thrown by Titans, on Mont Girard; watched the ocean of trees beneath them; and surrendered themselves to the spell of the mighty forest, with its tonic air and enormous silence.

There was nowhere in Paris, known to the little-spending tourist, to which these adventurers did not pay their tribute. Poppy was determined and delighted to do everything thoroughly; and although the pictures of the Luxembourg bored her, and Napoleon's tomb made no particular appeal to her historic sense, and even the Venus of Milo merely prompted her to a favourable comparison of her own figure with that of the immortal marble; yet the novelty of those crowded days kept them sweet, and the 'happy couple' returned to England refreshed and full of fine purposes. There was nothing to cloud the prospect as it appeared to Gervase. Ellen now bore his name. She had at last her opportunity and was cleansed. Marriage had made her right before the world, and together they would work with the angels.

On the boat crossing from Boulogne Gervase broke silence about the future. He painted in glowing colours

the joint life of service that lay before them; and Poppy, whose shifting dispositions were for the time being fixed, sang chorus of agreement with her husband in his intentions and ambitions. It was, in truth, in her case, but the enthusiasm of the neophyte who is attracted by any change, and whose present circumstances are comfortably cushioned and rich with the light of dawn. Her open sympathy was, however, good enough for Gervase; and in his young love, now truly awakened and strong, and his want of knowledge of that eternal mystery, Woman, he pressed his Ellen's hand and was confident of the fortune of the future.

CHAPTER XI

It was a different world to which Gervase Bente and his wife were translated.

Nuneholm is not a parish given over to slums, squalor, and such rude, harsh, murky life as is occasioned by proximity to those delectable institutions, Docks. On the contrary, it is a village cursed with a consciousness of extreme prosperity; it is not out of the world, as in some respects St Brendan's is; but much in the world—in the world associated with the comfortable Flesh and the Devil who loves respectability.

The people of Nuneholm think a deal of themselves, and look up to or down upon one another with a consideration or condescension as absurd as it is sincere. Quite a large proportion of its aristocrats—they have villas on 'The Height,' with coach-houses in which they keep, or hope to keep, motor-cars—are City people, stock-brokers and merchants, who can trace their family back for quite one or two generations.

If there is one thing these dear people—as the Rector generally calls them in his Sunday sermon—from their manners and want of manners, seem to be sure about —and they are uncertain about next to nothing—it must be that one of Society's top notches is to be found

on 'The Height.' Prosperity appears there to be the supreme test. To be able to afford to be idle is the measure to which the social rule is applied. Manners matter less: it seems to be the material that matters; though none of Nuneholm's aristocracy would say so, even to themselves. The Height is certainly the thing.

One merit for which the good folk—meaning, of course, the wealthier folk—of Nuneholm are entitled to credit is their devotion to the Church. The Rector, the Reverend Dunstan Deane, D.D., is their social leader as well as their spiritual guide; a garden-party without him to hand plates to the dowagers or to make pretty speeches to pretty maidens in arch praise of their pretty frocks might as well be a vegetable garden-party. Dr Deane is essential to the social superiority of the place; and not to be known by him is not to be known.

The Rector is built for his job. His clean, smooth, pleasant face, his silver hair cut long, his admirable tailor, his cultured accent and the little golden cross that dangles from his watch chain, proclaim him the clerical gentleman. He is so devoted a shepherd that he will never play bridge unless in civilian dress. He knows what is due to the Cloth. His professional frock-coat and collar he keeps for strictly parochial duties, which of course include those useful garden parties that bring together the woollier sheep of the flock. He has his tastes, maybe his prejudices. He will not touch claret if he can get sherry, and is so broad-minded that he has been known to quote in the pulpit William Cobbett, under the idea that it was Edmund Burke.

He has great faith in the Encyclopædia Britannica, Haydn's Dictionary of Dates, Burke's Peerage, the Red Book, Somebody's Gems of English Literature and Someone-else's 'Convenient Quotations.'

Needless to say, this essential Doctor of Divinity has a wife. Mrs Dunstan Deane is nothing like so popular as her husband—nay, she counteracts his proved worth. She is a nervous little creature, with a sharp, cold temper, a penetrating and inquiring disposition, and eyes of judgment. If a woman could be a whipper-snapper she would be such. One gleaming glance and the most fidgety Sunday-School infant, tired of wooden seats and the voice of platitudes, is as still as a suspected mouse. Teachers tremble before her, and the good old folk she regularly visits are not so cheerful as they used to be. She is at once admired and detested by the ladies of the parish, who alternately backbite her and gush. 'Mrs Rector' is the vinaigrette of the parish.

The church in Nuneholm flourishes. The Rector plumes himself on that. It is run on business lines; every sitting is taken; there is always a fat balance at the bank; the ordinary offertory is full and excellent, on extraordinary occasions it is bumper; and if, despite this dower of worldly fortune and circumstance, the church is never half full and the poorer folk do not overcrowd the wooden seats, without hassocks, that are free to them; if the Rector in his sermonising ambles easily along and never refers to such unpopular themes as Death and Judgment; if the Choir does yawn and openly gossip except when singing—its

members are paid more than a trifle a year, and therefore deem themselves privileged—what does it matter? The bell rings regularly every Sunday for those who care to attend; and it is not necessary to have more than one curate to see to the burials and the christenings, the catechising of children and the churching of women.

Gervase Bente had never been under any illusion as to the slackness of religious life in the parish. During the visits he had paid his aunt, who lived at Rotherway, some mile and a half from the church, he had seen enough to realise that spiritually it was a Sleepy Hollow. This discouraging fact did not unduly depress or disturb him: indeed it whetted that crusading spirit and deepened that enthusiasm of mysticism, which were parts of his individuality. To rouse this worldly-dreaming wilderness, to drive out the sloth which smothered its satisfied citizens—there was his opportunity and his duty.

As in the train going thither he contemplated the prospect before him he felt something as Hercules must have felt whilst girding himself for the cleansing of the Augean stables.

The desultory prospect allured him; he looked at his wife—Poppy was reading with close intent a yellow and red novelette—and was in half a mind to make her his complete confidante, reserving from her nothing. Earlier in the journey he had told her generally of his hopes and she had praised them with honeymoon fervour; but he wanted to confide in her all his aspirations, their every jot and tittle. He yearned to win from her the sympathy and

encouragement he knew he needed; but did not give expression to the yet indefinite intention, because she spoke instead.

'Rather a good story that! How they can think of their plots I can't imagine. They're always so new. I do love a good plot with excitement.'

Gervase cast a look at the favoured fiction.

'And who was "The Daughter of Mystery?"'

Poppy's face, which looked healthier and prettier than Gervase had hitherto known it, seemed to become charged with interest.

'You'd never guess,' she assured him. 'I wasn't so far out, because I had an idea Ethna was related to Dermid; but I didn't guess he was her own father.'

'And he was?'

'Yes; though it wasn't until they were about to be married, and at the church porch, and he had gone to meet her, that April——'

'April!' he was pleased to seem interested. 'It was in the springtime then—when the young man's fancy lightly turns——'

'No, dear. April is a girl——'

There was a touch of impatience in her voice.

'Oh sorry! April said something then?'

'Yes, she did; and if you are making fun of me I'll tell you nothing further.'

'Oh, cruel, cruel!' he murmured in the teasing lover's tone that had come to him naturally as he leaned across and took her hand; 'but when we are at home—you and I—I'll find you better books than that to read—

Meredith, Barrie, Stevenson; you have some treats in store.'

She wrinkled her nose at him: it was half playful in spirit, but also decidedly defiant. She was going to read what she pleased: she had made up her mind about that.

It was early yet; but the good effects of the holiday were already passing, and Ellen's irritable nerves were now, for the moment, suffering from the sameness of incessant change. She looked at him with straight eyes. She was not inclined to be treated as the good girl who must read what is beneficial; then, in something of a mocking tone, she slyly quoted:—

'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.'

Gervase looked at her with a curious eye, and wisely let things be. He realised that he did not entirely know her.

There was a pheasant in a field. He drew his wife's attention to the bird of plumage.

'Wouldn't I like the feathers for a hat,' she said; and Gervase, once again in holiday spirits, laughed. She laughed too: the slight tension was dispelled. He was very happy, and keenly interested in the new life and its prospects, being prepared to find fresh deeps and new lights in that dear, baffling being, his little wife, whose past had been so harsh, her experiences so horrible.

Meanwhile Nuneholm waited, unwitting, for the coming crusade; and the stockbroker's wives, with the sisters, cousins, aunts and grand-relatives of the prosperous merchants—not to mention the important

mere males—who dwelt or gathered to gossip and play bridge on The Height, were all unconscious that the new curate, of whom the Rector had spoken in his lightly appreciative way, was coming with the intentions of St Francis and of Jeremiah in his heart. 'A nice fellow,' the Rector had called him. 'Quite a scholar, I should think,' had been Bente's erroneous judgment of his future chief after the only interview they had shared; while Ellen Bente, who, being Poppy, was surely to have some part in the shaping of events, was forgotten by both, ignored by all, even by the sharp-eyed Mrs Dunstan Deane, who summed-up and judged the characters and future usefulness of the new-comers with her ordinary confident rapidity.

Miss Bente, Gervase's Aunt Grace, had found rooms for them. She, who had seen and quietly studied Ellen on her wedding-day, had decided, after some discussion with Gervase, that it was better the young couple did not share her house, 'The Willows.' She was cordially willing to make her new niece as happy as circumstances permitted; but the young lady's antecedents, of whom she of necessity knew something, and what she had read from her aspects and actions in those crucial few hours after the ceremony at St Brendan's, had taught her to be wary. Here was probably a reformed girl, a good girl and a brave girl; but——

Gervase was never so happy in his life as during that homeward journey. Here he was, with the chosen companion, travelling to his own hearth-side; and the promise of work, arduous, difficult, and therefore congenial to his peculiar temperament, was before him.

His aunt had met them at the station and driven with them to Cantuar Villas. There had been a touch of reserve about the meeting of the two women. It was certainly not cordial; but that passed unnoticed by Gervase, who happened to be busily concerned with looking after the luggage.

Poppy was silent during the drive; while her husband talked to Aunt Grace with more than his customary spirit. He was in a triumphant mood; all was well with his world. Gervase felt that the name of their new home, Cantuar Villa—a small semi-detached house in which the best rooms were furnished, polished and prepared for them—was of blessed augury. The landlady housekeeper, Mrs Carpenter, a woman of girth and good heart, was awaiting them with a broad smile of welcome; while Carpenter, her man, a black-bearded shoe-maker, remained in the background of shyness, and seemed not to be noticing them while he dug in the garden.

Aunt Grace did not enter, because she knew they were tired from their long journey. She drove on to Rotherway.

'What a place!' said Ellen when she and Gervase were alone.

'We'll make it very jolly,' he answered heartily. 'After all it's our home: and there's no place like it, you know.'

Poppy was frowning at a looking-glass, which certainly was not of perfect reflection and brightness; but still was superior to the mirror she had used in Alma Terrace.

'Look at this; look at this; look at this;' she said, pointing to ornaments and articles of furniture which were of the character inevitable to hired apartments.

Gervase was somewhat disappointed—a little more and he would have been displeased—at the critical spirit she was showing. It jarred on him.

'Never mind, old girl,' he coaxed her. 'You shall make it pretty and sweet—like yourself.'

He took her in his arms and kissed her: but her lips made no response. She turned away from his caress, not wilfully; but because she was studying with an interest not free from scorn a liver-coloured vase, which shouted in discords from the sideboard.

He, too, realised now that she was tired from the journey.

'Sit down in the armchair and rest while I go out,' he said quietly. 'I must see the Rector at once, and may as well go now while Mrs Whatsername's getting some food ready. Put your feet on this stool, and try and rest.'

'Oh, Gervase, can't we leave here? These rooms are odious. I did not think——'

'Come, come!' He had reached the door, but went back to her and rested a hand on her shoulder. 'You're tired, old lady! To-morrow we'll get rid of the worse things; and then you'll vote this a jolly little place. After a time, perhaps, we can find other rooms. Why, look at the garden!'

She would not look at the garden. She was in a cross humour; very tired, no doubt; but certainly yielding rather readily to her disposition to discontent.

'I think your aunt might have found something better than this.'

He started.

'Ellen, please stop this complaining. It's no good!' He was tending to be angry, for he was weary too. Her complaints might be tolerated; but not this purposeless ingratitude towards his aunt. 'Anyhow try and make the best of it. You're tired now; in a day or two——'

'I'm sick of "in a day or two."' She shook her shoulder pettishly and he removed his hand. It was no use arguing.

'Well, I'm off to see the Rector.' He spoke with enforced cheerfulness. 'Shan't be long, my dear. Do cheer up, Ellen,' he added. 'Let's make the best of things.'

Poppy sat for a few minutes after he had gone and appeared an image of sulks.

'A beastly hole!' she said looking about her, 'and he expects me to like it. He's as selfish as the rest of the men.' She rang the bell, and at once, a second time, rang it furiously. It was answered soon enough by Mrs Carpenter, still smiling, though the bell had seemed unduly violent and insistent.

'Is there anything I can get you, ma'am?'

'Yes, a can of hot water; and—will you take that freak away?'

Mrs Carpenter paled, and her lips tightened at the manner in which the instruction was given; but she obeyed. The offensive vase went to disfigure another room; and with it went some of the respect

wherewith Poppy, the clergyman's wife, had been regarded.

'Wonder how she'd like to live in it,' Ellen raged coldly, but her thoughts were now pursuing Miss Bente. 'A prying hypocrite, that's what she is; what did she come round to the station for? No sooner were we back, than she must poke her nose in. I'll teach the precious aunt to keep her place . . . I do loathe sanctimonious old maids!'

When Mrs Carpenter brought the water Ellen shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep. She was just a wee bit ashamed of herself, knowing she had been ungracious; and looking so small and tired in the arm-chair, Mrs Carpenter's kind heart warmed to her again; Poppy's rudeness was forgiven.

CHAPTER XII

THERE was improvement on the following day. Poppy was in better temper, and Gervase immensely relieved to find his wife taking things with the content and philosophy he had expected of her. The exhibition of querulous dissatisfaction she had made the last evening had worried him beyond words; and throughout his walk to the Rectory and the subsequent conversation with Dr Deane he was vaguely aware of the new uncertainty enthroned at home.

Poppy had been troublesome the whole of that evening; though not so bad as during the minutes of unreason when Mrs Carpenter's care and taste had been so decidedly scorned.

But a new day had come, the fatigues of the long journey were comforted away, and life was more hopeful. Gervase hurried off to his first early morning duty with an exhilaration he had never before experienced; even in the days when he was a fully-fledged deacon and prepared to believe that every clergyman was assured of saintship and every bishop supremely righteous and supernally wise.

When he returned to an early lunch Ellen welcomed him with smiles and glowing. She had not removed any of the detested ornaments or things, but was

decking the room with a wealth of flowers gathered from Joseph Carpenter's garden. She was like a child in her delight. She handled the bunches of blooms with excited pleasure, and rammed them generously and without discrimination or considered arrangement into vases all about the room.

'I do love the country!' she cried. 'Aren't these beautiful?'

'My darling!' said Gervase. 'It is a joy, a wonderful joy, to see you so happy. You see, the country is your true place: I felt sure you'd be happy here, and after St Brendan's it's—like paradise, isn't it?'

At the name of St Brendan's, Poppy's face turned grave.

'Don't mention the place,' she adjured him earnestly. 'I hate it—and all that it means. It was so ugly—hateful. . . . Don't mention it again, Gervase, will you?'

He smiled gladly and put his hands on her shoulders, looking happily into her eyes.

'Indeed, I won't. I want you to forget it, and all that chapter of life before we met. And I can't tell you how glad I am you like this little house—it is our first home, remember! I don't see why we shouldn't be awfully happy here. Eh, old lady?' He kissed her warmly on the lips.

'No,' she said, and not answering his caress; forgetting him, indeed, on the instant she looked round on the burdened vases and glasses, and wondered what to do with the gathered extravagance in her hands and on the table.

He saw her preoccupation, and in his present satisfaction was well content. He went out into the sunny garden and sat to read a book.

It was a new edition of *The Confessions of St Augustine*. As he read he wondered; the revelations of this volume, though he had read it frequently, seemed so new. The humanity of the great Saint and Father appealed to him: it seemed as though an abstraction had taken on humanity; and the fact that Augustine had sinned and risen triumphantly over his sinning, enhanced the present effect of his autobiography. Gervase closed the book and forgot the new home, everything—but Ellen. His marriage had opened his mind. It had made a man of him. It had taught him truths it was necessary to know; and if he could never again be all the ascetic and devoté he had been, he would be a still more helpful priest because of the complete humanity—so he put it—of his companionship with her to whom he was mated.

He rejoiced almost openly—his heart seemed shouting—because he had not remained bound to the old celibate intentions, and this quite apart from the fact that he had enabled his Ellen to escape from the life of grief and horrid dependence she had known in the old, sad, bad and shameful days.

His heart warmed with love as he thought of the little woman indoors making their home sweet with the flowers of the garden. He praised God, silently but devoutly, because he had found Poppy. He would not then—or at any time—have undone the folly he had completed for the ransoms of princes; and so his

thoughts reverted, in a drifting circle, to St Augustine, the Father, who, before he was chastened and became a great leader of the Church, had known the glamour and the prices of passion.

He was aroused from his cogitation on the humanities by the tinny sound of a gong, and Mrs Carpenter's welcome appearance. The rubicund lady was smiling all over her face; and restored to her natural good temper with the world. Ellen had been very sweetly gracious this morning. She had made no reference to her last evening's rudeness: but so gushed over and admired everything, remarked on the beauty of the garden, the convenience of the house, and the rest of it—meaning at the moment every word—that the heart of the simple housekeeper was entirely won, and she forgot the unpleasantness that had rankled through the livelong night.

'High spirited!' said Mrs Carpenter to her man. ''igh-spirited but nice.'

Carpenter, who was not so unobservant, grunted, and for the time being there it was left.

The simple luncheon seemed delightful to both the Bentes; it possessed all the charm of a picnic with none of the inconveniences—wasps, cold plates, and things forgotten. Poppy was in the highest spirits. She laughed about nothing and saw the roseate side of everything. Gervase, though naturally of more sober temperament, especially in these days of new hopes and purposes, shared her happiness, until Ellen's unending effervescence made him a little nervous; and out of his natural seriousness he quietly regarded her. Was

she fey? The question flashed through his mind. Was this excitement natural, or did it merely portend subsequent depression and consequent ill-temper? He was still young in his apprehensions of woman; had never known one intimately until now, if indeed he knew Ellen at all—he had periodical perplexities about her. He was, in any case, beginning to realise that his wife was a creature of moods, and could pass from one extreme to the other with an unreasonable swiftness.

She noticed that he was not responding to her gaiety quite so freely as he had done, and that the amused trifling with which he linked or parried her remarks was rather more considered than before.

'What's the matter with you, old Sobersides?' she asked of a sudden.

He laughed in answer.

'Oh, I'm all right. I was only wondering about you.'

'Me!'

He wisely did not express in speech the vague thoughts he had been thinking; he temporised, was diplomatic.

'Well, it's so good to see you happy . . . I suppose you won't be going far to-day?' he added, with purpose in his voice.

'Why not? I thought of going into the fields and finding out just where we are.'

As a matter of fact, Poppy had thought nothing of the kind; but in her rapture over things present she felt that some assertion of the sort was necessary.

'Well,' he answered, 'I expect it's very probable Mrs Deane will call. She's almost sure to do so: in fact, the Rector suggested as much: and I'm glad she'll

be seeing you in such jolly circumstances.' He looked about the room, at the flowers which were sparkling and singing everywhere.

Poppy's effervescence stopped; it was as though her bubbling spirits had suddenly fallen flat.

'And must I see her?'

Her pouted lips were ungracious. He looked at her frankly.

'I'm afraid you must, my dear;—why, of course, you must. I'm not keen on these conventions myself. A lot of time is wasted in calling and small-talking; but we clergy have to make the concessions; it's the only way of getting at the confidence of our people; and you as a clergyman's wife are one of us.'

'Am I?'

Ellen, struck by the incongruity, laughed, and Gervase was glad to hear her laughter, for it was good-humoured, kindly, without any such hint of defiance as, he knew, had sometimes accompanied her mirth.

'You are: and as I and the Rector will be working together; so, I expect, you and Mrs Deane will often work together. Clergymen's wives are important people, I can assure you, and are able to do an enormous amount of good.'

Poppy made a wry face, and for a moment was lost in thought, whilst she crumbled bread and fidgeted with a salt-cellar, generously spilling its contents.

'And suppose I've gone for a walk?' she said. 'I want to go for a walk.'

'My dear, of course you can go for a walk. There is no likelihood of her calling before half-past three or four.'

'But I hate walking directly after luncheon!'

The joyful effervescence had vanished, the elements of elf-like delight were dispersed: something of the old sulky and obstinate Poppy was back again.

Gervase made no reply to this. He was willing to trust to the common sense of his wife. She rose from the table and went upstairs to their room. She mused there for a time and then came down not dressed for walking.

'I really don't see why I should go out when I don't want to,' she said to herself aloud; and as nobody was near her nobody else heard, which was perhaps something of a disappointment to her.

Gervase, with his hat on his head, was in the garden looking at the flowers.

She found an old packet of cigarettes in a small handbag brought from Alma Terrace; and with a screw of the eyes and nose, representing the promise of mischief, lighted one, and, puffing it, went out to him. He glanced away when he saw her. He thought the smoking of cigarettes was rather an unpleasant habit, especially for women; and had said so to her in one of their spacious conversations before they were married. She had not forgotten this; and, because in the matter of visitors he seemed disinclined to consider her, she would enjoy this little act of rebellion against him. He said nothing: she thought he had not noticed anything, so she blew one puff of smoke in his direction. It provoked no response. He was not so small or stupid as to resent the passing impertinence of wilfulness.

'Have you seen the woman, dear?' she asked.

'Do you mean Mrs Deane? I've shaken hands with her, that's all.'

'Was it very impressive? . . . What is she like?'

She was at last checking her wilful impulse; the second question was better-tempered than the first.

Gervase realised this. He was now too much in love with his wife to examine very closely the spirit of what she said and did: but he could not help realising that he and Ellen even thus early were not seeing exactly eye to eye.

'I believe she's all right,' he said, 'but I only had a glimpse of her. Full of energy, I should think. You'll soon be able to judge for yourself.'

'H'm, doesn't sound very attractive!' She blew another puff towards him, and smiled as she watched him avoid it. Then he smiled too, as he saw it was a mere small naughtiness, done to tease him.

'I must go,' he said suddenly. 'I pay my first calls this afternoon. Some cottagers. Very different from St Brendan's.'

'Yes, horribly dull.'

He stared at her: then broke into laughter. He thought she was humorous, whereas she was only truthful. He took her hand, kissed it gaily, pulled her ear, and went.

'Yes, horribly dull,' she repeated softly to herself. 'Horribly, horribly dull!' then with a determined nod of the head got a sunshade and a novelette, and went to sit in the garden. 'I wonder how long I shall stick it.'

She stretched herself and lay back in the deck chair

which Mrs Carpenter had brought out for her use, and there half-dreamed, half-slept. She closed her eyes, peeping now and then at the glaring sky and enjoying the wind and shade.

She heard a ring. What was that? The Rector's wife?

'Damn it!' she said. She sprang from the chair and ran to the house.

'Mrs Carpenter, Mrs Carpenter!' she called through the kitchen window, 'if it's visitors, I'm not at home.'

Mrs Carpenter came forward. Her face was perturbed because of Poppy.

'It is visitors, ma'am: it's Mrs Deane. You'll be at home to her, won't you?' Not to be at home to the Rector's wife, the one person in Nuneholm to whom even the almost all-important Reverend Doctor was inferior, was to the simple mind of Mrs Carpenter like flying in the face of Providence.

There was another ring. The cry of the bell was peremptory. Its command decided Poppy. The feline in her disposition was ruffled. Her back was up.

'I will not!' she said; and walked calmly back to her chair.

Mrs Carpenter was at her wits'-end what to do. She could not give Poppy's message—the absolute ingenuousness of her nature forbade it; and yet she could not keep the Rector's wife at the front-door waiting.

The problem was solved for her by the appearance in the garden at the back of that redoubtable, indefeasible lady. She was not to be perturbed by any

privacy in the village of which her husband was Rector, and she Lady-High-Everything-Else.

'Did you not hear me ring, Mrs Carpenter?' she asked in a clear, cold, angry voice.

'Yes, 'm—oh, yes 'm.'

'Then why was the door not answered? I wish to see Mrs Bente. She is here, isn't she?'

'Yes, 'm; she's there in the garden;' and forthwith the housekeeper fled.

There was no escape for Poppy, as Mrs Deane, her eyes still shining with annoyance, though her lips wore the pleased expression of conventional greeting, came towards her.

Ellen was cowed. She rose from her chair meekly to receive the triumphant guest.

'Mrs Bente,' said the Rector's lady, 'that foolish woman nearly prevented my seeing you.'

'Oh dear!' said Poppy, suggesting her regret.

'It was very stupid of her. I am Mrs Dunstan Deane,' she went on. 'Your husband is going to work with mine; and, therefore, it is necessary I should have the pleasure of knowing you. Where shall we sit,' she added, rather sharply for a visitor?

There was only the deck chair. Ellen had it on the tip of her tongue to say pertly, 'We won't sit,' but had manners or trepidation enough not to say it.

'Let us go into the house, Mrs Deane.' She led the way to the sitting-room.

In spite of her earlier expressed unwillingness—due, in chief, to idleness and the desire to tease Gervase —Ellen was well enough pleased at the time to have this

visitor. It meant the opening of a new experience, of a chapter of social importance; and the prospect of fluttering among the grown-up butterflies of Nuneholm pleased her just at present.

When she and Mrs Deane were seated—the Rector's wife with a severe, upright, unbending back on a straight chair—Poppy said with the expected smile of insincerity, 'You are my first visitor.'

'And I ought to be your first visitor, Mrs Bente. It is only right I should be. The Rector wishes me to tell you that he hopes to see you very shortly, as soon as his duties permit.' All the while she was speaking her sharp eyes were closely inspecting Poppy, who felt herself flush invisibly. This searching feminine scrutiny was a new experience. It caused her, after a very little while, to loathe the intruder and to suspect her intentions; but no evidence of this dislike escaped her.

'That's very kind,' she answered. 'A delightful village this!'

'You think so?' The tone meant nothing: it might as well have implied that the Rector's lady did not think so.

'The scraggy bitch!' thought Poppy. 'Yes,' she said aloud, 'look at the flowers, aren't they lovely?' Mrs Deane looked at the flowers, but her face did not show a particular appreciation. 'They are all from Mrs Carpenter's garden.'

'Lovely, lovely!' the words were warm; but their intonation was ice. Mrs Deane had little use for flowers except as altar-decorations. She was a practical

woman. She had to think of the parish. 'Of course you come from London?'

'I do, and so different from this,' Poppy said guardedly. 'But I'm not a Londoner—no!'

'No?'

'No, I was born in Poona. Papa was an officer in the Indian Army—a Colonel.'

'Really!' Mrs Deane's manner was a little warmer.

'Yes, he was killed in—battle.' Poppy was going to say the Indian Mutiny—and then the Afghan War; but prudently refrained from anything definite. She was not sure of her dates.

'I was only a little thing at the time,' she added; 'but I remember his blue eyes and his scarlet coat.'

'Charming,' murmured the visitor—'And you met Mr Bente in town?'

'Yes, we—we worked in the same parish.'

'What? Really? You worked in the East End—in St Brendan's?' There was a gentler look in the beady eyes. Mrs Deane was frankly surprised.

'Not for long; my health wouldn't permit it.'

'I didn't understand from your husband—though, of course, I've hardly had time for a proper talk with him—but I don't think the Rector understood that you and Mr Bente had been fellow-workers.'

'Not fellow-workers—not exactly that.'

'No?—were you associated with a lay mission?'

'I suppose it would be that,' Poppy said, cudgelling her brain for ideas and mentally pinching herself for getting into an *impasse*.

She plunged into the abyss. 'I—I visited fallen women!'

'Oh, did you?' Mrs Deane loved to talk of fallen women. She had a special intonation of voice for that subject.

'Yes.' In for a penny, in for a pound. The spirit of adventure prompted Ellen to go on. 'Oh, Mrs Deane, you've no idea of the hardships they must endure. The poor things! The vile men——' She had found a theme on which she could enlarge; but, of a sudden, she recognised an eager and a cruel expression in her visitor's eyes. What did it portend? Ellen had no idea; but in a flash she decided not to be too eloquent or indignant about vile men or any one else. She checked herself.

'And what did you do to help them?' asked the other.

Poppy smiled sadly and looked into the face of her visitor with an ingenuous gaze.

'I talked to them, helped them with the little money I could spare, gave them food. I knew what they wanted—not drivel and tracts and rubbish.' The implied impertinence would out.

'What?' The Rector's lady was more bewildered than shocked. Ellen was conscious of the state of mind of her visitor and was encouraged to take advantage of it. Moreover, she felt at the moment that she had a purpose in view; and, more important still, knew what she was talking about.

'Believe me, Mrs Deane, the people who want to help them go the wrong way to work. They want

something better than psalms—they do! They want homes and loving attention and plenty of food; not goody-goodness.'

'But——'

'Just one minute.' Ellen raised a restraining hand. She was full of her subject. 'That's a problem the clergy and the righteous had better leave alone. It wants a man of the world, yes, or a woman of the world, who has been in the wrong herself, to help them.'

Mrs Deane was truly distressed. The conversation had passed beyond her control, and she was not used to that. She was like a lost ship in a raging sea. These too-modern sentiments sounded improper to her virtuous, practical ears.

'I must be going,' she declared.

'But you will have some tea, won't you?'

'Ah, no, I'm afraid I must be going.' Mrs Deane had risen, with no uncertainty, and held out a hand. 'I'm glad to have met you,' she managed to say, for conventionalities came to her rescue. 'The second Thursday is my day; but I shall hope to see you again before that. Good-afternoon.'

When she had gone Poppy went to the window and watched the hurriedly-retreating figure. An odd expression was on her face: it was not a smile, it was rather like a spoilt grin: and she did not feel entirely at ease.

'I am a bloody fool to talk such a lot,' she said to the flowers.

The visit had its effect. Mrs Deane had been impressed, despite the unconventionality of Ellen's views

on a certain subject. Before the week was out visitors —even visitors from The Height—began to call. The fact that Mrs Gervase Bente was the daughter of a Colonel became generally known in a surprising way. It almost seemed as if the little birds do go about whispering social news.

'A sweet woman!' was the rapid verdict. Ellen was so happy and in such high spirits through this rapid popularity that she tended to encourage the impression. 'And she has done great work among the poorest poor!' was the rider which opened to her the doors of the more serious members of the community—though they were few.

CHAPTER XIII

NOTHING succeeds, it seems, like social success. The fact that Ellen was a clergyman's wife and a colonel's daughter opened doors that would have been closed and adamant against the claims of the more worthy and the more pretentious.

Her sudden success made her extraordinarily happy, and so reflected that happiness on all about her. Gervase felt triumphant: his rash experiment had succeeded amazingly. The impossible had actually been accomplished, the time had come for the whooping.

Soon every day brought its note or notes of invitation to lunch or dinner, to an afternoon game of tennis or bridge. It was the flood of the gadabout season. Ellen, in the full enthusiasm of novelty, took advantage of the opportunity. She worked hard, endeavouring to cope with the flow of festivities offered.

Gervase twice accompanied her to social houses, then as he found that she was, at present, the person of principal pursuit he was able to slacken in his social attentions. He hated that sort of thing; he knew the hollowness and insincerity underlying those amenities and activities. To dance attendance on that rout of

vanity was repugnant to his unworldly soul; but he faced it and endured, solely for the sake of his wife, who was, he believed, regaining herself, putting on confidence for the battle of the future, learning her latent powers for brightness and charming, in the liveliness and lustre of that chapter of the madding crowd.

The Rector further helped Poppy's social progress. He made a point of paying her little playful attentions, of exchanging with her sallies of chaff. She was piquant, had personality, so he told the world; and in his open, expansive manner, he took every opportunity of praising her to Gervase and of congratulating Benedick on the capture of this particular Beatrice.

There were few at that stage who did not share the Rector's enthusiasm; but amongst them was his wife. Mrs Dunstan Deane, at the kindest, was in two minds about the alluring and piquant damosel. She was at first willing to open the social doors to her and disposed to believe that she was bright and witty—her sense of humour being insufficiently developed to allow her to dispute the assertion—but caution suggested that the progress in social favour of Mrs Bente was unexpectedly rapid; and reflection caused her to wonder not a little as to the exact nature of Ellen's asserted work among 'fallen women.' Her way of putting it had not been favourably impressive. Moreover, it rather looked as if the curate's wife did not go to church —in the circumstances an impossible omission—and it was absolutely certain that she co-operated not at

all in religious movements with the Rector's darkly determined and over-zealous lady. These were things that must be looked to! These were things that bid for caution.

Meanwhile, Ellen, indifferent to any outside opinion, continued her victorious progress, enjoyed the so-called good time that she was experiencing, and reflected her happy future on those with whom she was brought in touch. She had really not an opportunity to be her true self: she had not time even to be wilfully peevish. The weather, actually the weather also, was kind to her during those exultant days. Her outdoor life, her daily experiences, were robed and adorned with sunshine. All went, and promised still to go, for the best, in the novelty of those early excitements. Poppy was enjoying herself.

There was only one person with whom she did not get along well, and that was Gervase's Aunt Grace. They did not happen to meet. Whenever Miss Bente called at Cantuar Villas Ellen was out; and whenever the hospitable aunt wrote little notes of invitation and kindness it was held as a sufficient excuse for their not being answered that Gervase and his wife had at present too many calls on their attention. Miss Bente was well aware of the sudden social fortune of her new niece and was too sweet-natured to misinterpret or misunderstand the neglect. She took everything, even forgetfulness, as well-meant; but knowing more than the others did of the true character of the marriage, she wondered sadly how long this excitement

and feverous happiness would last. She was not without fears. She could not feel that the woman whom Gervase had married had outdone the Ethiop by thoroughly changing her skin; but she said nothing of this. No one shared her surmises. She kept them in her heart; and, waiting and wondering, still hoped.

She had no true ground for hoping. Poppy instinctively disliked her. Their natures were antipathetic. It was a case of the association of opposites with the fact of a felt antagonism.

Gervase was, however, not forgetful of the just claims of his aunt, and in the second week of their settlement in Nuneholm asked Ellen to go to Rotherway to see her.

'Yes, darling,' she promised at once, delightedly, effusively, it seemed. 'I'll go over this very afternoon if I can.'

'But aren't you fixed up for to-day?' he asked before she had finished the sentence. 'You're such a busy little person these days,' he added proudly.

'No, I'm not fixed up to-day. I'll go, and take her some of those roses, if Carpenter will let me have a few.'

'Good. Thank you, Ellen. That will be splendid; she'll be delighted.'

He went away to some hopeful duty, much the happier for Ellen's ardent willingness to please. He was, because love had covered his eyes, no clearer-sighted than most newly-married men.

She did not go. When the time came she had a good

excuse for not going, and when afterwards he gently protested, she was so pleasant and winning, so adroitly argumentative, that he was almost as gratified as if she had gone.

That was the nearest approach to a call at Rotherway that Ellen seemed capable of making in those young and bountiful times. She certainly had excuses enough for delaying the attention. Every morning brought its sufficient tale of invitations: every day saw the gleeful fulfilment of the insistent calls of a social programme.

The young person of Alma Terrace was transformed indeed. Even Mrs Barnes, who had known her in almost every one of her innumerable moods, would hardly have recognised this bride, who, despite her connection by marriage with the Church, was so full of point, piquancy and the fashionable joy of life.

'Mrs Bente, if you weren't a happy bride how dangerous you might be!' said the Rector to Ellen archly, in one of their many pleasant passages of arms.

'How little you know me!' she answered, looking with mischievous frankness into his beaming eyes.

'Ha ha!' said he in jocular disagreement.

Her honest simplicity charmed and impressed him. He did not quite forget her, even when he was playfully gallivanting with some other young wife or maiden, whose devotion to the Church did not prevent an innocent philandering.

'My dear Bente,' said he to his curate, 'your wife might be a power. She has personality—what a

treasure that is ! And wit. It is not so much what she says; it is how she says it. So—well, so *so*. You know. Oh, she's really delightful. Nuneholm's lucky to get her : you too, my dear fellow, you too—both of you !' He overflowed with fulsomeness.

Gervase was delighted to receive this testimony. He now was daily deeper in love with Ellen, and rejoiced to discover this tribute of appreciation from such an authority.

'I'm glad you think so,' said he.

'Think so? It is so. My dear fellow, she's an acquisition.'

Gervase was habitually averse from discussing persons, and would be especially averse from discussing himself or one so closely associated with himself as his wife. The Rector was, however, his spiritual, ecclesiastical, and, by virtue of his office, his social superior—so he felt—and for once he broke through the barrier of his reserve.

'All you say, Rector, is true of her, and she is the pluckiest girl in the world. She has had a fight for it; she has had disadvantages to encounter; but she has fought them down, she has won.'

He was, indeed, in love. His eyes flashed and darkened with enthusiasm. The Rector, who hated anything like a display of emotion and did not at any time care for tame listening, at once became a little bored by his assistant's enthusiasm. He pursed his lips, without showing it, and fumbled with the brim of the hat he was holding in his hands.

'Yes, my dear fellow,' he said, to shorten the discussion.

Gervase did not take it so.

'She has fought a battle and won,' he went on. 'Her charm and sweetness are really remarkable, considering all she has gone through.'

'H'm!'

'She is the perfect companion, bright and helpful, and——'

'My dear Bente,' said the Rector, grasping his arm and smiling with that crooked smile of his that many had found so attractive and misleading, 'Treasure her: guard her, keep her in the palace of your love. Remember that a good woman is—what was it?—well, worth her weight in rubies . . . I adore rubies.'

Having said so he patted his curate's arm three or four times and gracefully walked away. It was beautifully done, a triumph of tact and social art. He belonged to the later school of Turveydrop; he had a sort of deportment—of flippantly portentous deportment.

'I hope he's not going to be a bore,' he said to himself.

Meanwhile, Gervase was endeavouring to ease his hunger for service by busily visiting the houses of the poorer parishioners, and discovering what seemed a world untrodden by clerical feet. Wherever he went he was courteously received; but the ignorance of those people on the truths of religion as the Church teaches it, and their indifference to the fate of their immortal

souls, were becoming to him a horror. They knew little and they cared nothing; it was worse than St Brendan's, because in the desolate East End parish sordid poverty dwelt alone: and was not resident, as here, at the doors of the well-to-do who made a show of social superiority, were proud of the unserviceable use of wealth; and called themselves Christians. Nuneholm was proving worse than the Sleepy Hollow of his old imagining, judged from the standpoint of his rigid and exalted mission: it was a sink of worldliness, a whited sepulchre—except that the colour was a garish purple, too lavishly splashed with jewels and gold.

He laid definite plans for the improvement of things. This Slough of Despond should at least have some firm roadway for the feet of those who sought the mountains; but his intentions were as yet caught in confusion; there was so much needed, and there seemed so little help to be gained, for the number of rich or poor in Nuneholm disposed to sacrifice self for the common religious good were, so far as he could see, no more than none at all. It was, however, early yet to be final upon these things. Before he could build fruitful plans, before he could bring those plans to fruition, he must know his people, select those who would be more useful, and so have a human backing to his venture. Without good preparation it would be futile to approach the Rector, whose very ease of personality—Gervase was feeling sure—would be a hindrance.

The first thing for the reforming curate to do was to meet, know, and win the confidence of the people. He,

therefore, visited eagerly, and interested himself so far as he might do, in their lives, though to carry his purpose into those kindly yet unsympathetic homes was a challenge to his courage and a wound to his shyness. He really did not like visiting the people of this cold parish. St Brendan's had been different. There frankness of counsel and action were preferred. But here it was so hard for him to talk the nothings or trifles and the insincerities that form the passing conversations which were necessary and expected. He was too sincere in his convictions merely to babble about them; and yet he realised that if he were to talk about them it would have to be in a manner that would not disturb the harmony of the tea-cups. He was, moreover, too honest to pretend an affection for casual acquaintances; he could not imitate the confident humbugs whose shallow hearts are on their sleeves.

In their different ways, the newly-married couple settled down in Nuneholm, and found occupation for their hours. But Gervase very soon grew tired-hearted, though he would not confess it to himself. He was full of crusading ardour, and had no intention of being beaten. He would do what he had set out to do. He would recreate the Christian feeling of the place; he would be an apostle to this Laodicea. St Brendan's had given him confidence. He had done well there. He was not going to lose the fight here, in this more refined and cultured atmosphere. That he vowed in his heart.

And he was generally received with kindness wherever he went. If manners had been the measure of their

morals he might have hoped for much. But the manners of the Elect of Nuneholm were not based on goodness of heart; they were of slighter texture. And while still he did not quite realise it, he found that his work in that place was like gleaning for grain in a garden of flowers that were mostly artificial.

During this early period of depression his greatest comfort came from Ellen. This was actually the enjoyable fact. Her good spirits were a help to him. Not once did he, after the first difficulties, see her pettish or sulky—as unconsciously he had expected to find her —in those early days. She was as active as a wren, as agreeable as morning sunshine.

Her influence was, however, only indirectly helpful. She did not worry and she kept out of the way: and that was much to a man of the temperament of Gervase. Only once during those days, that to her were *couleur de rose*, did he actually need her. He had come home tired, and she to dress before going to some garden function. He threw himself on a couch and sighed his weariness.

'Cheer up,' she said, and bent to kiss the top of his head.

He smiled, looked up and caught her hand, playing unconsciously with the wedding ring, the token of their union.

'Isn't this jolly?' he said.

'Yes, it is jolly; so look it!' She drew away her fingers in order to put on a glove. He tried to put the hand to his lips but she had it away.

'If you want something to do,' she added, 'you can write a letter.'

'Yes, who to? Aunt Grace.'

'No.' She shut her lips tightly. It would have been a sign ominous to him, had he been alert enough to notice it.

'Well, who?'

'Why, that old vicar—What's-his-name?—of St Brendan's. You can say——'

'Yes?'

'You can say that I've turned up trumps and am promising to sprout wings.'

She had reached the door when she turned to flash him a final glance—was it quizzical or mischievous? —and then she went.

Gervase could hear her laughing in the passage, and was glad: then he wondered! He thought he might as well do as she suggested, and pulled out his fountain-pen.

As Ellen was going out of the front gate, a tradesman was bringing in goods to the side-entrance. He saw the curate's wife and eyed her curiously.

'Hot stuff!' was his comment to Mrs Carpenter, when she presently answered the side-door.

'Who?'

'A certain person who's just gone out of your front-gate.'

'Mrs Bente, do you mean?'

'Ah, strange goings on for a parson's lady!'

The housekeeper made no answer to this, though her upper lip grew longer. She knew her place and shut the door without a word so soon as the tradesman's business was done. The fellow felt snubbed; but he knew himself none the worse for that.

'Some folks may be blind, or won't see,' he thought; 'but I know—and so do others. The lady can put on airs and that; but——'

In some such way, though mutely, to himself, he expressed the growing verdict of the most determined and ungullible jury, who sit in judgment in the servants' halls. The maid and the footman see; the cook and the butler know: the tradesmen from them learn—and so the wide, wide world through its ever-active mouths multitudinous, and ears ever-attentive, becomes aware of facts that seem hidden and secret. And so from mean beginnings grows the gossip that ruins lives.

Ellen Bente was, unhappily, never nice to subordinates; it was rarely in her nature to be simply pleasant, and when she might appear nice was at the same time nearly always obviously insincere, so that the dislike and distrust she encouraged through her careless ways and manners strengthened and spread.

She was already being watched and talked about in Nuneholm; and, whether she knew it or not, cared not one halfpenny about it.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was one thing Poppy would not do—work for the Church and parish. Even the uncertain reputation she had established in the mind of Mrs Dunstan Deane as a 'social worker' would have diminished and possibly disappeared at once if the Rector had been another sort of man and Nuneholm a different order of parish. The place was, however, a thoroughly Sleepy Hollow, and neglect was tolerated, even in a curate's wife. Worse still, she would not go to Church on Sundays. This omission had horrified Gervase.

'But you must, my dear,' he said.

'But I won't, my dear,' she answered. 'I'm bothered if I will!'—and she did not go more than once and then to an evening service. He felt he must insist.

'It is so dull,' was her explanation, which pained her husband immeasurably. He did his best to persuade her. He said everything that could be said, pointed out the truth that being his wife she shared his responsibility; appealed to her loyalty, spoke of the need of religious exercise for the health of her immortal soul, talked of the example to the parish. It was mere waste of words; words written upon water.

'Why should I?' she had said. He had thereupon explained patiently and fully.

'Then I won't!' was all her answer; and from that rock of brass she would not budge.

There was nothing for Gervase Bente to do but work harder, as he did. His efforts in that cold conceited parish were as seed thrown by the wayside, where it could not thrive.

Gervase was becoming unhappy because of the unpromising character of his work. He had known the parish would mean hard effort; that very fact had appealed to his spirits and energies. He was born a religious fighter, and he fought; but in Nuneholm it was like pummelling an inert monster which had no feelings, or conscience, or self-respect. He begged the Vicar to allow him to hold more services; one every evening at least, and in the mornings of Saints' days. Dr Deane had only looked at him with his charming crooked smile and shaken his silver head, 'My dear, dear Bente,' he said in a gentle voice, 'I wish we could—I have often wished we could—but it is an affront to God (he pronounced it 'Gud') to hold services to which no one would come.'

Gervase had, thereupon, tried on other tacks—to establish a club for boys, to form a cricket team from members of the choir, to organise a parochial flower show, and an ambulance class; he even endeavoured to persuade the Vicar to invite priests from a North-country community to come and hold a mission—but the result was invariably the same. Dr Deane met his suggestions with a cheerful spirit and discussed the prospects blandly and eloquently; but next to nothing was

done, and there was no promise of better fortune in the future. Even the cricket-club did not get on to its feet, though the first stages of its establishment was hopeful.

After a choir-practice, which they had to attend on Friday nights, Gervase put the idea before the men and boys then present. The idea was accepted eagerly, and Bente's heart warmed. Ways and means were discussed. The wherewithal could be found. Farmer Stokes would lend his field, and perhaps would roll a pitch for them. Stumps, bails and a bat would be lent by old Bob Harvey, who kept the adjacent *Crooked Billet*, and was a good Churchman, and another bat could be borrowed, no doubt. Gervase himself bought a cricket-ball. That was all they needed, except the good-will: and that was plentifully promised too. But the promise was hardly fulfilled.

The cricketers met to play on the following Tuesday. The fact that the *Crooked Billet* was near the ground proved even more than a hindrance. The choir-men were thirsty, and the choir-boys would not take the game seriously. When the twilight was advancing and the match could be considered done, most of the players, even some of those whose duty was in the field, had drifted off; and the tenor and the bass—they who led the responses, and on Christmas day were allowed to sing solos—were actually fighting, until the irate curate in his indignant fury parted them by punching them both. He wrote the two men letters the next day which scorched them. He defined the

duties of the chorister in a manner that opened their minds.

Gervase was so depressed by the failure of this early effort that the cricket club died at its birth. . . . He tried in its place to establish a local branch of the Church of England Temperance Society.

The Rector was, as always, most sympathetic to the idea: but he explained that unless all the clergy of the parishes thereabout could be ardent teetotallers, such an effort would be possibly misunderstood and therefore better not: whereupon the defeated curate again lost his temper and said hot things about Laodiceans, at which the Rector drew himself up sadly and proudly —Doctor Deane really had a deal of dignity—and reminded him that discipline was a godly duty and that curates were as yet but the subalterns of the Church.

Gervase realised that he was in the wrong, apologised simply and earnestly, and went home as unhappy a man as walked under starlight.

'A good fellow; a well-meaning, dear fellow,' was the Vicar's charitable comment; 'but tactless and mistaken.'

So that neither in his work, nor at this stage in his home, could Gervase Bente be sure of finding comfort, for Poppy had come to be difficult.

The keenness of her enjoyment of the social attentions she received had begun to slacken; she was tired of the sameness of the excitement she was experiencing. This was not at once manifest to Gervase. He was still

so very charmed with his wife that little signs and portents had passed unheeded: but it was not long before he was compelled to realise the truth, which made itself evident in petty complaints against all manner of people, generally the Carpenters, but sometimes against persons whom he did not know.

She had become spoiled and disappointed: the result was vagaries and discontent. There would be spells in which nothing was right, and she had a special ability for saying so pointedly. Gervase grew keenly unhappy. The burden of her complaints was a constant jar and menace. Disappointment over his work in the parish, combined with this development at home, embittered and at times even poisoned his life. He alone could not avoid the tantrums of Ellen: he had to endure them, they were a part of the domestic conditions: she harassed him with her growing complaints and meanness.

Poor Poppy! Her temperament would have made perfection soon imperfect. Her chief discontentment was again with Cantuar Villas. This was a direct and rapid result of the more showy conditions of her new acquaintances on The Height. She was for ever throwing out hints of the need of removing—she talked about Gervase living in a sphere more suited to the honour of his profession;—and, hot with her novel grievance, was for ever complaining to him, and always unjustly, of Mrs Carpenter and her man. *She* didn't know her place, *he* was always poking about the garden when she wanted to be there: *she* was quite

capable of reading private letters; *he* had dared to call her 'missie' without touching his hat.

Gervase stung with pain through this persecution and peevishness reasoned with her, pleaded with her, promised that things would be all right in time, went so far as boldly to charge her not to be affected by the snobbery and worldliness of the people on The Height, about whom he had no longer any illusions. It was like throwing sops of water into Etna. The fires of Ellen's conceit and discontent would not be put out. Indeed they flamed the more.

Increasing domestic discomfort—it was not positively unhappiness yet, because he still clung to his lover's faith in Ellen—was now linked with the growing conviction that his work in the parish was futile, and that all the glowing dreams of crusade which had preceded his coming to Nuneholm were to prove the folly of a fool. The old necessary self-confidence in his powers and certain ultimate success was spoiled for the time. He had become, even already—and it was early yet—a disappointed man. His only resource in the parish now was in an increased visiting of the poor. He was convinced that in their own homes he might exercise an influence and do an essential good. That was his only hope, comfort, and the cause of a new, though bruised, encouragement.

But there was also his aunt. He had with intention troubled her not at all. Had things gone swimmingly in the parish he would have seen much more of her, for he was very fond of Aunt Grace; but, as it was, he

avoided 'The Willows.' He was also anxious that, so far as possible, she should not suspect there were rifts in the home lute. He was sensitive over his wretchedness. However, on an afternoon when he was free, and the ecclesiastical life of Nuneholm comprised too much freedom, he decided to pay her a visit.

He found her in her garden, sewing. As he walked to her seated under the trees, she looked up; and the sunlight playing on her face showed it unexpectedly grave and worn.

'Why, what's the matter?' he asked, shocked.

She looked at him thoughtfully: and avoided his question by asking another: 'You don't look as happy as I should like, Gervase. Tell me why.'

He threw himself on the grass, tossed his chequered black and white straw hat to a distance, aiming at and missing the green flame of a young fir-tree, and the impulse came to him then to confide in her—about the parish. It was after all right to do so. There had always been between them a deep spiritual union. Until he went to St Brendan's she was the oracle and the solace to whom he had gone in his passing boyish troubles. The strength and sweetness of her sympathy had never failed him; therefore to speak to her was proved comforting. He would confide in her now.

'Nuneholm is not the place for me,' he said.

'But it is early yet, Gervase—only a few weeks. It takes some knowing; you must not give up yet.'

She leaned over and stroked his hair as she had done years before, when he had come home, smarting with

indignation from some school injustice, or pleased as Punch at having won some reward for cleverness or prowess.

He seized her hand and held it: he pressed it to his lips. 'You are the same old aunt,' he said, 'never failing; the dearest person in the wide world.'

Her eyes grew dim as she looked down at him and tried to smile. How she loved this boy, who, though a man now—and a married man—was still, in the generosity of soul and his eager confidence in the ultimate triumph of rightness, an unspoiled, serious boy.

'I'm not going to give up,' he assured her. 'I should be a poor sort of parson if I did. I'm on the winning side—I know that. But—but how is this stodgy, stupid place to be galvanised, to be waked up? If only an earthquake could tumble that Height down from its silly pompousness. "Why in the name of glory are they proud?" ' he quoted.

'Example!' she said to him, softly answering his question. 'Your example. That is how.'

There followed one of their old intimate talks, in which he spoke frankly of his former parochial hopes and the difficulties that prevented and assailed them. He did not condemn the Rector, he said not one word subversive to the loyalty due, or to the discipline about which Doctor Deane had rebuked him; but his aunt read from his words enough to be aware, and, indeed, knew well already, that the greatest of Gervase's disappointments was due to the Laodicean and Corinthian tendencies of Dr Deane. But

'Example' was still her word of counsel, and to that she added 'Patience.'

The talk did Gervase good. It brought him relief of mind and heart. Although the old crusading happy confidence was not re-lighted, his ardent hopefulness was quickened anew; he was the fearless, dutiful soldier again.

'And when are you coming to see Ellen?' he asked, when their religious confidences were concluded.

'I'm afraid not again,' she answered gently, and her eyes swam suddenly with tears.

He turned to her abruptly.

'Why?'

He saw that she felt pain, the pain of heart which makes the whole world, even when in sunshine, shadowed.

'Have you been? Have you seen her?'

'I called a fortnight ago; and again last week. Ellen was not at home.'

'But—that must have been an accident!'

'The second time I called she was certainly at home. I saw it in Mrs Carpenter's face, and I had heard Ellen's voice.'

'She—refused to see you?'

'I'm sorry to say that she did. She was officially not at home. I am grieved. I wanted to love your wife, my dear. I—I think I might have done so. I should have tried.'

He leaned over and kissed the hands that were folded on her knees.

'It is abominable,' he said, and felt the fire of his

natural anger. 'I must speak to her. How horrid and vulgar it all is! Will you call to-morrow afternoon? I'll be there.'

'No, dear, I can't. I called again to-day.'

'To-day! Yes, and——' he paused, breathless. There was eagerness of interrogation in his voice.

'I saw her. She was on the point of going out, as I arrived at the gate. She could not avoid me, though I saw she wished to do so.'

'There must be some hideous mistake, some misunderstanding. I'll see Ellen at once.'

'It would be of no use, Gervase. She dislikes me profoundly. I could see that. There is a misunderstanding, I dare say; but you—or any one else—won't be able to remove it. Your wife even—hates me. I'm afraid it's even that.'

Aunt Grace had spoken in a low, reluctant voice. There was no gainsaying her seriousness or sincerity.

'But what did she do?' He was bewildered.

'She passed me by—cut me, as they call it—in the most flagrant manner.' She paused. To Gervase the garden with its voices seemed strangely silent. 'I'm sorry to have to say this; but it was impossible for things to go on without your knowing. You had to know.'

'But why?—why? It is so stupid. It's impossible!'

'Nevertheless, it is true; and what is worse, Mrs Carpenter saw the whole proceeding. She was watching from a window. I cannot call again.'

There was silence for moments—that seemed

minutes. This mishappening spelt catastrophe to Gervase. The stupidities of the parish were as nothing to this insult by his wife to her who had been father, mother, all to him. It was impossible, deplorable, detestable; beyond expression bad.

'It need not worry you unduly, Gervase,' he heard his aunt saying. 'It merely means that your wife and I are not friends, that's all. If some day she—changes, I shall be glad to go on with her for your sake as if nothing had happened; but meanwhile, remember, you have your work to do.'

'My work!' The words were spoken bitterly.

'Yes. Nuncholm needs you,' she persisted. 'In its hopelessness it needs you. You can always come and see me when you feel dispirited, as you must do sometimes: and I will help you. We need not mention Ellen again, and it will be unnecessary for you even to speak to her about this.'

'But I must!'

'No, please. It would do no good. I do not wish it. I have decided to go to Rotherway Church, so that she and I don't clash. There must be no scandal. Nobody need know anything has happened. We can trust Mrs Carpenter not to talk.'

While his aunt was thus quietly explaining the new situation, Gervase Bente's feelings were in a whirl. She had evidently thought everything out; but as for Ellen—what could have been her motive for this incredibly stupid, rude, cruel, even ungrateful conduct?

He said not much more, and went home soon. As

he walked he thought of the new trouble that had suddenly sprung on him; and felt that, in comparison with this new life among the absurd, conceited, purse-proud people of Nuneholm, with domestic disharmonies threatening his very self-respect, the old life at St Brendan's was actually fortunate and delightful. As he went slowly homeward—his heart was too weary for speedy walking—anger against Poppy began to burn and deepen. Her rudeness to his aunt was evil. Its ungraciousness whipped his wrath. There must be an explanation. He prayed—in no prayerful spirit—that there could be an explanation.

Gervase Bente was already a much-altered man.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Gervase reached home it was shortly after six, and he thought at first that Poppy was not there. He waited for her a little while, sitting in the armchair, staring and brooding. Successors to the flowers over which his wife had made such a fuss, drooped and faded in the vases. That little burst of emotional excitement had gone the way of all such exuberance. Ellen's love of flowers, of the joys of the garden and the country, hardly outlived the verbal expression. As Gervase looked with disillusioned eyes about their sitting-room, he realised how surely she was falling away from the good intentions she had loudly proclaimed. Neglect and untidiness were too evident, as well as want of taste. There was no house-pride here. It was a new discovery to Gervase, though not a new fact. Hitherto the illusions of love had veiled his eyes and blunted his perceptions.

He rang the bell, and Mrs Carpenter answered it. She was no longer the genial smiling person who had greeted the newcomers some weeks before; but a serious woman with a pale, displeased and gloomy countenance.

'Sorry to trouble you, Mrs Carpenter; but have you any idea when my wife will be back?'

'Mrs Bente is back,' she replied, as she fingered the corner of her apron nervously: 'and begging your pardon, sir; I'd like to speak to you.'

'Back is she? Upstairs?'

'Yes, sir;—and if you please, sir, I'd be glad if you'd make it convenient to go.'

'Good Lord!' That was the boldest expletive Gervase had ever yet permitted himself to utter. 'But we can't go, we must stay here; why should we go?'

'I've had a talk with Carpenter, and Carpenter says there's nothing else to be done, sir. Carpenter was in the garden at work on the marrows and he heard Mrs Bente swearing at me—as she did, sir, badly; and he says, "We've had enough of this, missus," as we have, sir—and sorry I am to have to say it.'

She looked sorry. The poor woman was evidently miserable enough: and so was Gervase.

'But Mrs Carpenter, this is horrid. I hoped we were going to be with you all the while we are at Nuneholm.'

The housekeeper sniffed: and thereby expressed her sympathy—the sniff was the symbol of unshed tears.

'Very sorry, sir. You're the pleasantest gentleman and the least troublesome I've ever done for; but your lady, sir—she's terrible. Nothing's right for her now. Two days ago—on Monday afternoon to be sure—she threw a glove at me; and for nothing, sir—nothing at all.'

'I must speak to her.' The world of his ideals seemed tumbling about his ears. 'Until I've done that, don't

think of our going, please—oh, it would be impossible —impossible!'

He got up and walked to the window, tapping the pane with the points of his fingers. He was perplexed and lost in thought.

Mrs Carpenter was feeling too sorry for him to pursue her purpose then, and she had done all that could be required by giving him notice; so she returned to the kitchen where Carpenter with glittering eyes was waiting to hear 'how the gentleman took it.'

Gervase was taking it badly, very badly. As he realised how Poppy was repaying the sacrifice he had made for her, abusing her privileges, making others unhappy, wrath and anger possessed him. He clenched his fists and inwardly raged. The meanness, the injustice of her conduct, upset him. As if the miserable discouragements of the parish-work were not sufficient, without the hindrance put in his way by this wilful and ungracious woman!

He waited there deliberately until he was calm, and then with decided steps went upstairs to the bedroom.

Ellen was lying fully dressed on the bed. She was smoking a cigarette, and she eyed him sourly. There was yet a superb indifference in her mien, as though she knew he could do nothing. He noticed that the dust of her boots was on the counterpane. He looked at her and then about the room, at the evidence of untidiness everywhere. He controlled himself, but felt himself trembling with renewed anger.

'Well, and what do you want? Perhaps another time you'll knock when I'm in the bedroom lying down.'

She knew a storm threatened and was about to break. It was unnecessary now to curb her insolence. Her tone accentuated the rudeness of her words.

Gervase drew a cane armchair nearer to the bed; went to the window and drew the blind a little higher, regulating it—not because it needed regulation, but in order to check his impatience and to curb his clamorous wrath. That done he sat down.

'Ellen, we must have a talk.'

She sat up on the bed, arranged her skirts, and threw the half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace, where for a while it smouldered busily, sending up a thin column of smoke.

'Mrs Carpenter has given us notice to go. She says we must leave these rooms.'

'And very glad I am to hear it. I loathe the place.'

'We cannot leave. My work demands that we should stay here.'

Poppy flung off the bed and sat at the side: her eyes were ablaze; it almost seemed as if she had been drinking: but that was not so—to any extent. She was intoxicated rather with her own vile humours. They surged within her, completely possessed her, caused her to be passionate to make mischief, and to hurt this man. At that moment she was sure she hated Gervase worse than any one she had ever met.

'You always put yourself before others. You are

the most selfish man I have known—selfish—selfish —beastly selfish!' She raised a small fist and shook it in front of his face.

The sight of her emotional, irrational anger cooled him. It gave him a new confidence and strength. He was aware that if he kept calm he would win this dismal struggle before them.

'Listen to me!' The command was so crisp and certain that she hearkened against her will. 'The work I have to do here is too responsible and precious for it to be spoiled by wrangles between us or with other people. You've got to learn your true position. Play the game—do your duty as well as you can, and you shall have as good a time as I can give you. But refuse to play the game, and——' he paused.

'And what will you do?' she sneered.

'Compel you to play it.'

'May I ask how?' Her tone annoyed him. He felt the furies arising anew; but he forced them back.

'I don't want to remind you of things; but I must if you ask me how.'

She looked at him, and struck him on the shoulder with her fist. At the blow he turned pale, white as death.

'You—gentleman!' she said: and her voice was trembling with anger. 'So you are going to throw the past in my face, are you? I'd be ashamed to taunt any girl with her misfortunes. Oh, you beast!'

He waited until the spasm of bitter anger was past, and then seized her wrist, holding it so that she could

not repeat the blow. She gave an hysterical scream, 'Help! help!' Again her emotionalism steeled him. He waited for her to calm down; which she did soon. She was impressed by his quiet, by his apparent coldness; and for a very little occasion would have wept. When he saw she was calm, and felt she would remain so, he released her wrist.

'Now you will listen to me, Ellen; and please not interrupt. We've been married six weeks—only six weeks. I have no intention of speaking of your past or of reminding you of anything that could pain you; but I beg you to remember, Ellen, that I married you to help you, and to give you a new start: to give you the chance you had missed.'

He paused for a moment necessarily: he was sorry for her now. His manner was again characteristically gentle.

'Go on!' she said bitterly. She was anxious to hurt him, but dared not strike again. She could only hurt through her manner, through her words.

'I'm willing—anxious to say nothing more about anything that happened before six weeks ago. I'm willing to forget you were ever anything other than the good woman I believe you still could be if you tried; but it rests with you . . . You've got to change your ways—at once. I knew you were undisciplined—perhaps I ought to have got you some sort of discipline.'

'Go on; beat me!—beat me! you coward!'

'Don't talk nonsense, Ellen.' He raised his voice in his sharp indignation. 'I care for you too much to

hurt you; though I'm not going to allow you to ruin my—our prospects through your whims and ill-tempers and mad follies. You've got to turn over several new leaves.' He remembered her treatment of Aunt Grace: but recalling the injunction to silence, for the present, said nothing about it. 'You've been rude to Mrs Carpenter.'

'I haven't!'

'Why did she give me notice to go?'

Poppy did not answer at once, but gazed at him with gloomy, vindictive eyes. Her lips were working; she breathed heavily.

'What had you done,' he asked, 'to change that good-hearted woman's warm friendship to an anxiety to be rid of us? Tell me!'

'Nothing at all! I can't answer for her changes.'

'I'm afraid you can, Ellen. You swore at her this morning.'

'I didn't. She's a liar!'

'Well, I believe what she said to me. I believe that you did.' He emphasised the words, and momentarily she knit her brows, making a deep mark, a black dint, between her eyes.

'You swore at her. Do you realise how intolerable it is for a clergyman's wife to be guilty of such vulgarity?'

'The woman kept worrying me about this thing and that thing with her silly questionings and cackle.'

'Then you did swear at her?'

'You say I did, and I don't care if I did. Go on!

I didn't know curates could be brave and strong enough —manly enough—to bully a lonely woman. I wish one of my boys was here.' She suddenly blazed out. 'You'd soon see!'

That caused him also to flame.

'Don't mention those things,' he interrupted her fiercely. 'I don't want to speak of anything to do with your terrible life before we were married. . . . Oh, Ellen!' His voice grew suddenly gentle; he was sorry from the depths of his heart for this weak and wilful creature, who in some ways was so girlish, in other ways so—even wickedly old, it seemed. 'Can't you see—won't you see, how your happiness is intermixed with mine? We married each other, my dear, determined to try and get the greatest possible good out of our union; and here we are—a few weeks afterwards—in sight of shipwreck.'

'Then let us go away from this beastly Nuneholm: let us go to London. I'll do anything you like if we can live there. I hate the country with its stupid people, and dull fields, and cows and birds. In London there are lights. I must have lights.'

He was struck with the idea that she might be genuinely unhappy in this place, which certainly had not gladdened him. But how to discover the truth he could not fathom. He felt that he could not trust a word she said—she was such a creature of moods; and, anyhow, whatever plans he might make for the future he would not, could not, surrender to her just now. To do so, in view of her insane treatment of his

aunt and Mrs Carpenter, would be not merely unwise but base. The certainty that she would trade on any weakness of his kept him resolute.

'It is impossible for us to shift about like this at a moment's notice,' he said more judicially than he felt. 'I've my work to do—work which is of more concern than even our happiness.'

'Then are we to stay here always? Oh, Gervase, it's hateful!'

'Of course not! I certainly should not spend all my life in this place—but a year or two at least we may have to be here. We can't help it; and so, my dear—' his voice again grew gentle; he could not help it though he feared the gentleness would be misconstrued as weakness, and, therefore, might spur her naughty wilfulness—'you've got to help me make it as tolerable and happy as possible.'

He watched her vivid face with anxiously searching eyes. It seemed as if she were more reasonable now. The hardness of her aspect was relaxed: the angers were gone.

'And the first rule is to be decent and pleasant to other people. I believe I can persuade Mrs Carpenter to overlook what has happened: and as for Aunt Grace——'

'Oh, she has been sneaking and blabbing, has she?' Her eyes flashed. Her tongue had the sharpness of cruelty.

'No, she doesn't do such things,' he answered sternly, 'as you would know, Ellen, if you had the faintest

perception of character. You insulted the best and kindest woman in the world.'

His praise of her imagined *bête-noire* stirred anew her evil humours.

'I hate her,' she said.

'No, you don't, you can't,' he replied confidently. 'I can't understand why you think you do; but you don't. Tell me, Why do you think you do?' He waited for her answer.

'Because—because I can see in her face that she does not trust me. I saw it at St Brendan's on the day—oh, six weeks ago. She watched me like a cat: as if she would like to do me a mischief. She was jealous—that's it. She couldn't bear that I could take "my dear nephew" away from her.'

This acknowledgment touched him—the absurdity of her passing mimicry almost amused him; he was eager to be done with this hideous quarrel.

'You are mistaken, Ellen—extraordinarily mistaken! Aunt Grace has nothing but love and helpful goodness in her heart; and, if you would let her, she'd be a mother to you, as she has been to me pretty well all my life. She even offered to put us up in her house.'

'Then why didn't she?'

'Because we agreed—she and I—that it was better for relatives to live apart when one of them is married; but whenever you please to go there, "The Willows" will be a home to you, and she——'

'I'm not going there! I can't help it, Gervase, but I do—I do hate your aunt. You see only the good side

of her: but I know that she did spy on me, and would have prevented my marrying you if she could.'

There was an obvious retort in his mind; but of course he refrained from making it.

'Come, come, be reasonable!' he begged, and, venturing, he leaned over and took her hand. She tried to withdraw it from his grasp, but her effort was not earnest, and she did not persist.

'I love you, Ellen, and because I loved you I married you, and intended to do my best to make you happy and keep your love for myself. We've got to give and take, my dear——'

'Oh, don't preach, Gervase, please! I'm sick to death of preaching.'

'To give and take. I've given you a home, such as it is; haven't I? Let us try and make that home happy. Remember, I've got my work to do. Help me to do it by keeping friends with the people here——'

'A lot of mean snobs!'

'But you've got on splendidly with them!'

'Oh, some.'

'But you have invitations no end, jollities; why you know many more of the chief people in Nuneholm than I do.'

She looked at him for a moment with considering eyes.

'Some of them are nice; some are beasts, snobby, stupid. I can't stand the sort of woman who sits in a chair and says "Haw, yes," or "Haw, no," with half a dozen stock phrases.'

He laughed. This stimulated his sense of humour. He was yearning to be rid of the tragics.

'And there are too many of that sort,' she went on; 'and I won't—I won't be bored. They bore me with their stuck-up airs and catch phrases and their showing off of their tuppeny wealth. The beastly snobs!'

'Well, Mrs Carpenter is no snob.'

'I can't make friends of servants.'

'Hush, my dear! We are all servants—*servi servorum*, the highest and the least of those who wear this Cloth—and Mrs Carpenter seems a particularly nice woman, and we cannot do without her.'

Ellen wriggled, and he released her hand. She rose from the bed and impulsively went out of the room and stood on the landing.

'Mrs Carpenter,' she called down the stairs, 'I'm sorry I was rude to you.' She came back to the bedroom, looking childishly, charmingly, defiant. Gervase had risen enchanted. The rapidity of her action both astounded and delighted him. What a strange little woman she was; impulsive, wilful, not so ungenerous after all!

She looked at him now with wistful, curious, questioning eyes.

He went to her and took her in his arms.

'My darling,' he breathed, and kissed her passionately. He felt her body trembling as he pressed her to him. She hid her face in his shoulder.

Of course she was forgiven.

CHAPTER XVI

In the following week Mrs Fryth-Willyams gave her annual garden-party, and Gervase Bente and his wife appeared prominently in public together for the first time.

Mrs Fryth-Willyams was, and is, regarded by herself, and some others, as the presiding spirit of The Height. It is under her sway that that eminent resort of the local fashionable has obtained its reputation for stiff-necked priority. Her annual garden-party is, in consequence, a function spoken of in prospect and retrospect by those privileged to attend it, as the Event of the Nuneholm year.

On this occasion it was an event of double importance, for it marked the coming of age of Mrs Fryth-Willyams' pride and blossom, Bernard, the only son of his widowed mother.

The great day dawned; and grew hot and hotter. The sun was regnant in a brazen sky. The birds were silent; there was no wind. The heavy heat weighing on the spirits of the joy-seekers induced a solemnity befitting the occasion; for in such an affair as this, flippancy could only be tolerated in the very youthful or exceedingly old; and in any case it would be

unusual for the bigwigs and littlewigs of The Height to take themselves other than ponderously.

Poppy was once again in the seventh heaven of that only complete condition of happiness, anticipatory delight. She had put on her best behaviour. She beamed on Gervase, on Mrs Carpenter, even on the distant and indifferent Joseph, as if there was no one else in the world she loved so well. Under the impetus given by the promise of the garden-party she went through her clothing and modified and mended; overcoming the tendency to untidiness, her old complaint, which to critical eyes had been daily becoming more apparent. She had for the time being an ambitious purpose, and saw herself at this particular function a social leader, a personage in that limited hierarchy, as the bride of a representative of that sometimes mundane institution, the Church.

She decided on a colour-scheme, which, if the weather had proved other than happened, would have been defective through extravagance. She was bold and played with contrasts, successfully; and opposites, enemies, leapt to each other, embraced and were friends. Her dress was tussore, with trimmings and ribbons of orange and mauve. The jewellery shown by the other women, for The Height was the habitation of a prosperity inevitably displayed in sparkling stones and solid gold—helped Ellen, whose apparent simplicity proved welcome.

She was in the highest spirits, prepared to respond to any mood, provided it was not sepulchral; and

rallied her husband upon his serious face. Gervase was certainly not happy. He loathed this order of festival: and the unquestionable necessity of attending it did not diminish his dread of the ordeal. To be compelled to stand about and utter small talk when there was much work crying to be done, and among these very people, was to his earnest mind tantamount to playing a penny-whistle in the middle of the Slough of Despond. But he must go to it, that was certain; and to please his mercurial wife, as he paced beside her up the dry slope leading to Mrs Fryth-Willyams' residence, he tried to look pleased and in a playful mood. He did his best; but he felt that he could not gallivant.

There was a stream of people entering when they reached the gates, and a procession of motor-cars approaching, purred and fuffed and popped. They passed through an avenue of young lime-trees and sycamores, knowing their way by the strip of red carpet that led to a huge marquee.

'Isn't it lovely?' Poppy whispered to him delightedly—or was it delight or scorn?

'Absolutely wretched!' he quietly answered; and her ripple of laughter caused a blowsy, dressy dowager in front of them to turn her head and stare. When the enlarged lady had recognised that the mirth-maker was merely nobody she resumed her forward progress, and Poppy grimaced at the nape of the solid neck.

Gervase cast her a side-glance and frown of caution.

'I'm going to enjoy myself,' said she, and laughed again with high spirits.

Mrs Fryth-Willyams and her son—the heir of the occasion—were standing before the entrance to the marquee smiling determinedly, while a big butler with a little voice did his best to distinguish and announce the names of the guests.

'Mr and Mrs Bunt,' he cried.

'So glad to see you, Mrs Bunt,' said Mrs Fryth-Willyams, while her conventional smile for the moment widened. Having so said she gave Ellen's hand a pull—it is a bad way some persons have when receiving—plainly implying that way was to be made for the next comer, and there was to be no lingering at this shrine.

That was too much for Poppy, in her present mood.

'Our name is Bente, not Bunt—Mrs Willyams,' she said, and also smiled in a widened conventional manner.

The impertinence—for to omit the 'Fryth,' to shear from that sounding patronymic its better-half, was more than a rudeness, it was a deed of sacrilege—caused Mrs Fryth-Willyams to glare: but she made no verbal rejoinder, as the curate and his wife passed on, to lose themselves among the groups on the lawn, where, while occasionally acknowledging the distant greetings of acquaintances, they were stared at curiously; until Gervase found for his wife a garden chair and she sat and he stood, and knew boredom absolute. He was rather surprised that so few there seemed to

know Ellen, in spite of her social success. He could not quite make it out.

It was, however, not long before the Rector and his wife appeared. Doctor Deane was now in his element; the perfect priest in his true parish. His stream of words and clear tenor laugh could be heard almost constantly, while his small wife stood near him and looked about her with keen and beady eyes. She saw Poppy; but did not return Gervase's prompt salute.

'What's the row with the Gimlet?' Ellen asked him.

'She's like that—a weird person. I rather think it's because you don't go to church.'

'She *is* a cat,' said Poppy.

'Hush, my dear!' Gervase looked down at her; 'it's her duty, you know.'

'To poke her nose into other people's concerns? What's it to do with her?'

'She is the Rector's wife,' he answered, deeming that to be, as from his clerical standpoint it was, explanation sufficient.

'Oh, shut up, Gervase, what has that to do with it? I'll snub her when I get a chance.' The earlier geniality was suddenly changed.

'Oh no, Ellen,' he begged and felt anxious.

'Well, why does she cut me? Won't I just!'

Fortunately the Rector then saw his curate and sailed towards them over the turf. It was like a gleaming galleon coming to port. Poppy enjoyed his pomposity and importance; his sparkling sallies pleased her. She liked being made a fuss of. He was enough of a

frivol, in his large pulpit manner, to be welcome; especially as there was no one else in sight whom she knew as well as she knew him.

'At last!' he said archly. 'Every Sunday I look towards a certain seat—aha!—which from time immemorial—quite three years—has been sacred to the curate's wife, mother or mother-in-law, and—depressing emptiness! De—pressing emptiness!'

Gervase was sorry this topic had been chosen; but there was no help for it now, and the Rector might, if he could, persuade Ellen to the views she had but recently rejected. He wandered off to pay his tribute of homage to Mrs Dunstan Deane, who received him coldly, talked indifferently for a few minutes about the worn fringe of the altar-cloth, and the drunkenness of Abel Thomas's elderly mother. She then went back to Mrs Fryth-Willyams, to stand by the side of the hostess and lend the dignity of the "Church-set" to the importance of that happy and serious occasion. It was rather like the outer association of mind and matter. Mrs Deane, though small, was evidently masterly, while Mrs Fryth-Willyams was large, fleshy and red, her rubicundity being partly due to the heat of the day, but chiefly, an unfriendly friend had declared, to the exceeding blueness of her blood.

The stream of entering guests had ceased its volume: it had become a driblet, and then an occasional drop. It was no longer necessary for Mrs Fryth-Willyams to stand by the marquee and receive.

'Come, deah thing!' she said in a commanding voice.

Bernard, the deah thing, turned like an automaton and still grinning—he was of a social disposition and could not forget it was his natal day—followed his mother across the lawn, with Mrs Deane stalking importantly at her side. They found their way here and there, talking to this person, exchanging greetings with that; while a local band—Mannheim's Italian Orchestra, but none the less excessively British—droned an old waltz.

Mrs Fryth-Willyams caught sight of Poppy leaning back in the garden chair.

'Who is that—that person to whom your deah husband is talking?' she asked the Rector's lady.

Ellen was conscious of being examined by unfriendly eyes.

'The wife of our new curate.'

'H'm, do you like her?'

'Well——' began Mrs Deane as she gazed at her husband, who assuredly had spent time enough with the young woman.

'I think she's a minx,' said the hostess shortly . . . 'and she called me Mrs Willyams.'

Mrs Deane realised then where the sting lay, and the adequate cause of Mrs Fryth-Willyams' displeasure. She cast a glance from the corners of her eyes at the curate's wife, and decided that the Rector had stayed long enough with Mrs Bente.

'Dunstan dear!' she raised her voice to say, at the same time as she acknowledged Poppy with a cold and formal smile. 'Mrs Fryth-Willyams wants to talk

with you——' and the Rector, ever-obedient, and ever willing to pay tribute to that shrine, raised a gay hat and retired.

'So that's the wife of your new curate, Rector.'

'Yes, dear lady. A bright little person.'

'H'm, what do you know about her?'

Mrs Fryth-Willyams found two chairs in a corner shaded by one of the cedars after which her house was named, and sat. The Rector took the other chair.

'Bernard, deah thing!' his mother commanded, 'run along to the marquee and see that people are getting what they want. You can get somebody an ice or something—now run along, deah! Be useful.'

Bernard dashed off to the marquee, and was overwhelmed with attentions.

'A dear fellow!' cried the Rector expansively, 'that boy of yours, Mrs Fryth-Willyams—he's a man now—promises to be a splendid specimen of the best type of Englishman—hale, willing, cheery, hearty; the kind to carry trenches and ladies' hearts, the sort who are born to enlarge the boundaries of our wonderful Empire—eh?'

'Yes, Rector, of course—but isn't she rather a minx?'

He was brought back to the subject with such a directness, that he felt rather like a large pebble dropped to earth.

'Not a bit of it, dear lady; at least, I think not. Her husband—Bente—is a fine fellow; but a little daring, a little regardless of—er—ecclesiastical proprieties.

Ha! if he were the Rector we'd soon have the church in a blaze—no diplomacy, no tact!'

'And where does she come from?' There was a little interval of interruptions as the expansive hostess passed greetings with this person and that—'Is the young woman one of US? That's what I want to know.'

'I don't know,' said the Rector thoughtfully. 'I really don't know much about her; but Bente—you know Gervase Bente—his aunt lives at "The Willows," out by Rotherway——'

'Oh, I know Miss Bente.' She had no hesitancy in interrupting him. 'But it's the wife. Who exactly is she? So you don't know for certain that she is one of US?'

'Well—er—not for certain; but Bente is—so she is, eh—why not?'

'I don't quite follow that. The man may be a gentleman, and the wife anybody. And now I come to think of it, that must be the young woman, who has, I gather, caused some talk among our set.'

'Oh?' The Rector picked up his ears to listen.

'Mind this is private at present; and I've heard nothing actual; but Mrs—but I'd better not mention names; anyhow somebody who attends your church, and whose opinion you value, is certain she used bad language the other afternoon—a most vulgar expression—I don't know what, but then I shouldn't know what—but, Rector, she is a clergyman's wife; and for anybody to say anything of that kind about a clergyman's wife proves there is something in it.'

She looked at him with stupid, judicial eyes.

'Now isn't it so?'

The Rector was in his garden-party mood. He was by this time bored by his hostess. He wanted to babble and philander in his hearty old-boy manner with the frocklings; and, although he appreciated this monopoly of the lady of the occasion, was not disposed to be cross-examined in such a baffling and fatiguing manner. He shook a wise head. It was the easiest way for him then, as nearly always. 'We must look into it,' he said diplomatically; and then, 'Do let me fetch you some claret cup, or tea, or something—I am sure you must be weary after receiving so many people . . . you are so good! These hospitable grounds.'

'Presently, thank you, I'd rather rest here for a little while—if I'm not keeping you.'

Her tone was just touched with snap. He recognised it at once.

'Dear lady, I'm entirely at your service.'

He settled the knees of his trousers, with a critical eye contemplated their seams, and breathed a sigh. Then an idea born of the old Adam occurred.

'But would you not like to talk to the young woman yourself. You'd soon find out then.'

He was roused and slightly shocked by the baleful light appearing that moment in his hostess's eyes. He thought it was due to his suggestion, that because of his temerity he was being mildly blasted with the breath of Mrs Fryth-Willyams' displeasure, but then

he saw, and the sight won him relief. Bernard, the joy and hope of the house—nay, might not he now be called the head of the house?—was hurrying on willing feet to—Ellen Bente. He was carrying a strawberry ice and a glass of champagne-cup. What did this mean?

'What a naughty boy you are!' They, straining attentively, could hear Mrs Bente's playful chiding.

'Bernard!' cried his mother in her softest company voice. 'Bernard deah!'

But Bernard deah was lost for the time to any distant command, maternal or otherwise. In some way Ellen had caught his fancy and for her own freakish purposes had bound him to her chariot wheels. She was a capable young woman.

'What am I to do?' the mother said in perplexity. She was obviously a stupid woman, whose intellectual possibilities had lain fallow so long that she was barely equal even to ordinary occasions.

'Nothing at all, dear lady; do nothing at all,' the Rector counselled emphatically. The good old policy once more.

'Then let us go to the refreshment tent,' she commanded, 'I must turn my back on—that!'

She raised herself heavily from the chair and went to the marquee, the Rector following slowly, alert to give her the slip and find frivolity with something nearer to sweet-and-twenty.

Poppy watched them go with glee in her eyes, and as Gervase was not in sight—he was talking hymnbooks

with the people's warden—slipped her fingers on to Bernard's wrist and gave it a gentle pressure.

'You are stunning!' he declared.

'I love the name Bernard,' she said. 'It suits you —so manly!'

The imps of mischief were alive within her. She was reckless. In sheer mirthful malice she was tempted to play with this young ass whose mamma, it was easy to see, regarded her with disapproval. If Mrs Fryth-Willyams must disapprove, she should have cause to disapprove. Ellen suddenly hated her.

'Pickled cabbage!' she said to herself, reflecting contempt upon her hostess's complexion. 'And what are you going to be now you are—twenty-one?' she asked, and he answered at blundering, boyish length.

It rejoiced Ellen to know she had Master Fryth-Willyams in tow, and that not a few of the busybodies present were aware of the fact, and were looking at her and him with growing interest. She piqued their curiosity deliberately; encouraged those who did not know of her to wonder at her; who she was and why young Bernard was dancing attendance on her. It was good fun. Her spirits were rising again. Bernard talked, but she had no ear or thought for what he was saying. These busybodies were the people she was amused with, she managed to keep him interested in himself. Meanwhile, Mannheim's Italian Orchestra made dirge of a comic opera.

After a little while Mrs Fryth-Willyams sent a servant for Bernard. He must come to the marquee at once.

He had social duties there at that very moment. The message had the note of an ultimatum.

He was an obedient youth—his mother throughout his life had been too dictatorial for him to be otherwise —so he knew no hesitancy but went forthwith. His mother almost pounced on him and took care not again to lose him; but, despite the adulation he was receiving, and his care of the guests, and the hundred and one distractions encountered under that vast awning, and the eternal clatter of crockery, laughter and chattering, he was at no time unaware of Mrs Bente's unusual personality and her small insidious flatteries.

'Charming, charming!' he murmured when somebody asked him to pass a cream jug and he handed instead an empty tea-cup.

Poppy had sown seeds, to blossom as such seeds do, at once, with gourd-like rapidity in hearts as different as those of Bernard Fryth-Willyams and his mother. They were of passion and of poison. She laughed to herself with the delight of the promise of mischief, and looked about to see whom else she might subdue.

The passion of the man-hunt was upon her: she was a cat, a tigress, with talons out for pastime or prey. Beware the wanton who looked for mischief and mirth! She was reckless and abandoned. Old fires were stirred; the old wickedness was alive and potent.

Gervase came within her view, walking rapidly towards her.

CHAPTER XVII

GERVASE asked her to go with him to the marquee. The Rector was making a speech. It was an unusual thing, speech-making at a Fryth-Willyams' garden-party: but the occasion was altogether unusual this year, and it was only right and proper that some one —and who else but Dr Deane?—should note the fact by proposing the health of Bernard Fryth-Willyams and his mother, that splendid matron—as the Rector called the lady to her excessive annoyance—who had given so bright a boy to an admiring and, yes, even a grateful world.

It is unnecessary here to repeat what the orator said; for the florid phrases, the festal platitudes, the conventional tags were not of outside interest, and even so are available to eager historians in the files of the *Nuneholm and County Times*, which organ devoted no less than three columns—generally of surnames—to the local Event of the Year. The dutiful reporter failed to record verbatim Bernard's unprepared response. He merely recorded that 'Mr Fryth-Willyams replied to the toast of his health, which was drunk rapturously with cheers, in a few words of unaffected simplicity and good feeling.' That reporter—in the

way of the tribe—painted the lily. What Bernard actually said was :—

'Er—er—thanks—thanks very much—er !—and that's all.—Yes !'

And what did it matter if he was tongue-tied and unequal to the sudden occasion. The audience wrapped his hesitation in cheers, such cheers as could not have been more voluminous and sincere had the orator been—anybody's politician. So that within the limits suggested, Bernard Fryth-Willyams proved sufficient.

Ellen had not cared to join the crowd in the great tent. The little she heard of the Rector's speech and the nothing she heard of Bernard's, had been more than enough. She found place on a cushioned rout-seat by the side of the fat dowager, whose glance of disfavour had not displeased her when they were entering the grounds.

Seeing Ellen so near, the good woman fidgeted. She was afraid this sallow-faced young person, who had dressed so strangely and laughed so annoyingly behind her back, would address her—and they had not been introduced ! Lady Dawkin possessed the pride proper to the newest aristocracy : her husband had been a knight for exactly two years because of the services he had rendered his party, as the newspapers euphemistically put it.

Poppy was not unconscious of the large lady's dissatisfaction. She watched with the tail of her eye, and when she realised that the other's gaze was upon

her looked her full in the face, and then gently away. Nobody could out-do Ellen in fetching insolence.

Her ladyship bridled: temper was up. She turned red—for the moment her colour was equal to that perpetual to Mrs Fryth-Willyams—she shifted, fidgeted, fumed. Poppy wished to goodness somebody she knew would come along so that she might make conversation, and let this stuck-up pig (she used in her thought rather a coarser expression) know that in her view there were others in the world as good as she.

Only Gervase came—she would rather have had Bernard Fryth-Willyams—therefore, Gervase must do: husbands have their uses.

'Dearest,' she murmured, 'don't you think we might go? It's become such a crowd!' She drawled the last words in excellent imitation of the tired woman of society. The barb was lost on Lady Dawkin. Poppy might as well not have spoken. The titled dame was merely indifferent.

'All right, let's go!' Bente answered; but again Ellen changed her mind.

'No, we may as well stay.'

Gervase cast a puzzled look at his wife, though surely there was no reason for him to be puzzled. He ought to have known that she was ever consistent in her inconsistency: that was the one certainty about her.

'But you might introduce me to some one,' she added plaintively, and then was conscious of a cold stare from Lady Dawkin's eyes. 'The only persons worth

talking to in this howling wilderness are the old Rector and that dear boy, Bernard.'

The dear boy Bernard had by this time uttered his few words of unaffected simplicity and good feeling, and the crowd was streaming out of the tent back to the sun-weary grounds.

Some of the fathers and husbands of the damsels, dames, and dowagers present were now arriving from the City. They generally wore white hats and were rather effusively genial. Daughters hurried to greet their sires and show the world how real was their family love. Mrs Fryth-Willyams and her boy enjoyed fresh tributes of obvious compliments from the increasing stream of newcomers, but they showed no signs of weariness. He continued to wear his wide, broad smile; she was no paler.

Poppy was conscious that things were livelier now the men were arriving. She preferred tigers to tabbies. She pulled herself together, and looked with interest at this man and at that, weighing their possibilities, gauging their characters.

She did not care for them: she was coming to that conclusion. Generally they were too "stuffy,' too ordinary and conventional, too stodgily self-contented for her taste. She brought a varied range of experience to bear, and found the creatures dull—not as bad as the women, of course, for they were 'ghastly'; but so 'unromantic.' That was the adjective she used. She gave it a meaning of her own. The younger men and youths she had no use for. They were generally content

to ignore her, preferring the younger girls who were plentiful and determinately inviting. She told herself she liked men with experience best.

It was annoying, though, that none of them came near her. She yawned, and then caught sight of Gervase talking to a newcomer, a thickly-built, smartly-dressed, dark-skinned man with a black moustache and eyes that roved. She had seen him before, hurrying past Cantuar Villas on the way to or from the railway station.

While he talked he happened to glance at her, and instinct awakened, compelled her to act. She flashed a look of meaning and caught his eyes. He took the message.

The next moment she was aware that Gervase was conducting him to her.

'I want to introduce Mr Temble to you, Ellen. This is my wife, Mr Temble. Mr Temble is one of our sidesmen, my dear.'

'Delighted to meet you, Mrs Bente.' He leaned down and squeezed her hand. The secret and familiar sign-manual told Ellen that here was one of the right sort. She smiled up at him and momentarily widened her eyes.

'You can run away and play, Gervase,' she said chaffingly; 'while Mr Temble gets me and perhaps himself a cup of tea.'

Temble laughed at her readiness, and the curate was constrained to share his mirth and wander away. Lady Dawkin rose and joined a small knot of dowagers

whose stolid dignity lent depression to the rose-entwined pergola behind them. She was welcomed with a general labial relaxing intended for a smile. They were an exclusive set.

Poppy screwed up her face in contempt and Temble smiled at her grimaced humour.

'I like your husband,' he said to her: 'and, by Jove, he's a lucky man. Jolly glad you both came to Nuneholm: it ought to liven up the place.'

'Yes, it needs livening.'

'You think so.'

'My dear man, it's as slow and stale as an old herring.'

He laughed.

'It's as stupid and starchy as that old thing,' and she turned to poke a nose at poor Lady Dawkin, who was feeling very important and did not look it.

'I say, rather severe that!'

'Well, get me that cup of tea and I shan't feel so —humped! as you men call it.'

Again he responded with laughter. Poppy's naturalness, which he took for naïveté, sent him into raptures, and still appreciating what he thought was a touch of humorous originality, he fetched her the tea, and its accompaniments.

'Now tell me all about yourself,' she said. 'It must be jolly to go every day to town. Ah, dear old London! How is Aldgate Pump, and the what-ye-call-it with the bow and arrow in Piccadilly Circus? Do you know, I'm simply longing to smell the Strand again—why, I'd be more than satisfied with a sniff of Cable Street,

when the colza lamps are blazing. I hate this stuffy, starchy place; and those floppy dowagers—they are absolutely the limit.'

'You're awfully hard on us, Mrs Bente. The country's better than the town any day.'

'Of course, you say so. Oh, you men! You can slip up to London by the nine o'clock express, and there's no knowing what you are up to—and that's how you prefer the country. I wish I was a man.'

'Jolly glad you aren't,' he said archly, and laughed in his throat.

'Why, think of the liberty you have,' she went on, looking at him. 'Off you go, and it may be Epsom or Brighton for aught we know. Oh, I know something of the ways of men!' Suddenly she stopped: she realised this was dangerous ground. 'I've watched them from a safe distance. Yes, of course I'd like some tea, didn't I say so? Isn't it hot?'

While Temble was away, obtaining their stimulant, Poppy knitted her brows with thought. At that moment she was despising her husband and the little interests of that stupid place: and this new man with his vitality and force, his obvious prosperity and inherent though curbed vulgarity, allured her. Temble's personality was of the sort she understood. It compelled her. It represented force, acceptable force. Had circumstances required it she could more easily have been Temble's slave than the curate's wife.

Temble brought the tea and a glistering pile of dangerous pastry.

'You are a dear!' said Ellen. 'I could live on that sort of nourishment.'

Meanwhile, Temble had also been thinking, though indefinitely, of what this weird, original young woman had been saying.

'So you know London pretty well,' he said.

'Pretty well,' she answered, 'though I come from India.'

'Oh, do you?'

He waited, expecting her to continue, and Poppy putting her thoughts in order, wondered what version of the truth she should tell. She was ready to invent anything, for this man tempted her to talk, unconsciously was urging her to let herself go; but she was prudent enough at present to rein and control her inclinations: moreover, curiosity spurred her in regard to him.

'And is there a Mrs Temble?' she asked. It seemed to her that the complacency of her companion was dimmed by the bold question; as if the reference to his wife curbed his adventurousness. He looked sharply at Ellen; and felt for the moment offended, angry.

'There is,' he said shortly: 'she's at home. She wouldn't come. She—er—has bad health.'

'Oh: I'm sorry; but very glad her bad health did not cause you to stay away.'

She was fooling him as he suspected; but he smiled more easily.

'Thanks, Mrs Bente; but I'm afraid you're rather sarcastic, aren't you?'

'Never,' she protested, though she felt flattered, as to be judged sarcastic means to be accused of the possession of some measure of wit. 'I asked after Mrs Temble because I'm interested in my friends. Should I be regarded as suspicious if I asked if there were any —any little quivers, don't you sidespeople call it? By the way, what does a sidesman do besides collect our coins and wear a frock-coat on the Sabbath day?'

He laughed aloud at this. Poppy had no idea she could be so humorous. His heartiness and his strong white teeth—evidence of strength, and she liked men to be strong—attracted her. She smiled at him, and he vowed in his vulgar mind that she was good sport, different from what was to be expected within the Fryth-Willyams gates. He was disposed to treat her with raillery and with confidence, as he felt she was treating him.

'There are four; the eldest is ten. I suppose you'd call that a quiverful.'

'Poor Mrs Temble!' said she.

'Not a bit of it! My wife would like fifty.'

She sighed; and he laughed again.

'Do you think you ought to?' she asked with all her calculated simplicity. He looked straight at her, slightly frowning. His brown eyes flashed; this man was very full of vitality.

'For my part,' with all her seeming innocence she went on before he could make rejoinder, 'I intend to be spared!'

He found himself emitting a little whistle, and looked at her and then at the distant Gervase, who now was enduring the Rector.

'If I'd a husband like——' she went on, then paused, gave him a significant glance, and changed the subject. 'I say, it is hot, isn't it?—sultry. I believe we're going to have a storm.'

They looked at the sky. It was still a shield of brass, metal of blue, burning, blazing with the heat of a tropic sun.

Temble was so stupefied by Poppy's boldness that he could say nothing: but he began to feel the spell of this woman who was to him too womanly. He realised that here was no conventional creature content to live the life which is enough for the majority of her sisters; but one who was, at least, mentally wanton. She was pursuing him, he felt it: the instinct common to coarse natures proclaimed the fact. She was pursuing him, and asking to be pursued. He was—with all his sidesmanship—a coarse man with vulgar tastes and fierce passions. His opinion of woman was devoid of any ideal. She was a necessity and a burden; such a chattel as the wandering patriarchs regarded her; one who would meekly accept man as lord, master, the head of the harem, paying for services rendered with jewellery, sables, and other such means of material, competitive display.

Temble suddenly found himself keen to have 'an affair' with Poppy; but characteristically he was cautious; he wished to be sure he was safe, that there

would not be a costly price to pay for the privilege of the intrusion.

'How long have you been married to Mr Bente?' he asked.

'An awfully long time,' she answered—'more than a month.'

That again was amusing; but this time Temble suppressed the easy mirth that sprang to his lips. The new game appealed to his seriousness. It was too exciting to be interrupted by laughter. He was keen after the quarry, for the hunted was hunter too. The grossness of his personality was titillated by this ardent, compelling, tantalising woman, whose attractiveness rested in her novelty and bizarrerie, not in her person; for among the women present the curate's wife was rather in the shadow. Poppy did not shine in a physical competition. She had no presence or features, and though she made the best of it, the colour of her face was a handicap. But still, considering her defects and disadvantages, Temble found her—as others had done—a woman of sufficient allurement. There was no mistake about that. He must be cautious. He was very certain of the necessity of prudence. He did not know her. Her curious frankness had fascinated him, yet it also warned him. Could so outspoken a person be trusted? If he was familiar with her, as he was tempted to be, would she abuse that familiarity, and talk of him as she had talked to him of others? A prudent person was Temble, like most rakes of established positions.

He had no morality whatever: he could be as unscrupulous as any scoundrel when there was something to be gained which only cold, selfish unscrupulousness could win: but he was not a sidesman in a fashionable church for nothing. He enjoyed being one of the elect at Nuneholm, a favoured friend of the courtly Rector, hail-fellow with this and that inhabitant of The Height; so that if be decided to run after Poppy it would not be in the light of day, and only in such a manner as would not imperil his reputation as a citizen and a churchman. These worldly considerations flashed through his brain with a speed beyond light; and then he observed Ellen looking at him with a quizzical expression in her eyes.

'You are a jolly little girl!' he gushed, and with his knee pressed against her.

'Am I?' she said quietly. 'Hands off till you know me better,' she added slowly.

'By Jove, and you've caution too!' he thought, then added loudly, 'Well I guess we'll see something more of each other during the next few months. I hope so. If your husband is—what did you say he was?'

'I didn't say he was anything, Mr Temble,' for now she was disposed to be, or to seem, prudent; 'and I think you've talked with me long enough.'

'Oh, come now! We can be jolly good friends——'

'I dare say!' she answered lazily, 'but we're only new acquaintances at present. I believe it is going to pour,' she added suddenly.

She told the truth. A huge blob of rain flattened itself on an empty chair beside them. There was an instant gathering of skirts, a general tendency to gird-up and run. Suddenly a voice cried 'Rain!' The word gave the start to a stampede. Dowagers and damsels, heavy fathers and light-footed youths, began to hurry pell-mell to shelter, some under trees, some beneath shrubs, a few into the Fryth-Willyams' house; but most into the white marquee. There was no order of going: all went at once. Manners were often forgotten; and way not always given to the ladies.

Then the heavens opened and a deluge fell. The skies had been deceitful. Under their blaze and azure beauty they had been preparing; and the rain came down solidly; it swished, splashed, sighed, descended in volume. A wind arose, the curtains of the marquee flapped. Within the insecurity of its protection the Rector found himself wedged between Lady Dawkin and a can of cream; Gervase was swept off his feet and realised that he was sitting on a pile of plates with the table, on doubtful trestles, quivering beneath him. Everybody was anywhere. There were fears for frocks and hats. Ellen who had joined the rush with Temble at her heels, was pressed, pushed and shoved against the damp, dark canvas outside the marquee, pent in a horrid squash. She wriggled and struggled angrily. She escaped from the ruck. She found herself caught and pulled backward among sheltering shrubs by two strong arms, and then—they were alone—knew herself kissed, kissed suddenly on the nape of the neck,

on the cheek, on the mouth, in the midst of the tumult. She flashed a glance round angrily. Who was this who thus had dared? It was Temble—as she expected.

'What do you mean?' she gasped. 'You are a beast!' She was angry, furious: she loathed always to be caught at a disadvantage, and struggled. He laughed quietly.

'You are a vixen, a witch!' he breathed in her ear. 'Nobody saw!' Prudence as well as passion had spoken.

'You've no right,——' she began, panting with the strain of the run and the struggle. 'I hate you, you hypocrite!' She found his hand against her mouth; and, an old savage instinct compelling her, she bit.

'You little, little devil!' he said. 'I'll make you pay for that!' He was not hurt or angry, he was very excited and rather amused; that was all; but the violence of her deed caused her mood to change. She turned with a wrench to look up into his face. He read the meaning in her eyes at once; and felt triumphant. He grasped her arm.

'Not now,' she murmured: 'let me go.'

He let her go, slipped into the rainstorm, regardless of deluge, convenience or clothes; while she found shelter in the crowded doorway of the great tent, where she shivered with the cold of the wetting, and an excitement which seemed almost delirious. She quaked, panted, and at the same time was calculating with the businesslike brains of the experienced wanton, what this new adventure might mean and bring. In

his blunter way Temble was occupied with the same cause and wonder. Without question the episode was passionate, primeval, tempestuous, forbidding, vulgar —out of place, entirely out of place, at the Fryth-Willyams' garden-party, that Event of the Nuneholm year—but so also was Poppy.

When the storm had cleared she went home, with Gervase, in a surprisingly good temper.

But then the mood changed. Before dinner-time she was making rude remarks, which Gervase tactfully took for amusing, about her husband's stodginess, and the cant of the parish, and then became cold, distant and silent, ending and retiring with the cutting remark that he was not funny.

When she had gone upstairs he felt serious about these alarums and diversities; and then, good kindly man, put them down to her being over-tired.

CHAPTER XVIII

THINGS became a little complicated after that. Mrs Fryth-Willyams did not forget Ellen's ill-behaviour, and in many nice, subtle ways managed to imbue her familiars and gossips, the fortunate few who shared her atmosphere of high exclusiveness, with some of her own prejudice and suspicions.

Not that she had anything to go upon. If she had known even the least of the truth of Poppy's past it would have made her a happy woman; for brooding on this recent braving of her importance on her own native heath had embittered her, and she loathed even the memory of the curate's wife. To be able at once to crush presumption and to do it in the name and interests of virtue would have been extraordinarily delicious. It would have been the Pharisee's ultimate triumph. What more could have been desired? If only she had known!

But she had not known, she did not know—the gods and men were not helpful: and all she could do was to lecture Bernard for the exhibition he had made of himself at the garden-party, with that 'impossible person,' and forbid his speaking to her again. Then she began the gossiping meanness.

Ellen was soon aware of the change of demeanour in her surroundings. People were certainly more aloof. The earlier open doors were now less obviously open. Some who had called and nodded and acknowledged her, acknowledged her and nodded no longer: those with whom she had been friends ceased to make new advances; there was a fall in the receipt of invitations; and so far as she was concerned she really did not care a bit whether these people knew her or not.

For now they had come to bore her. She was tired of them. False though her own standards were, she was keenly aware of the falseness of their standards. So she came to despise and hate Nuneholm and its inhabitants. It had never been a slow process with her to seize on the deficiencies of others—she would have seen Cromwell's warts long before she saw the great Oliver—and soon was probing Gervase, torturing him, because of her clear view, gladly expressed, of the poses and pomposities, passing shams and little cruelties, social hypocrisies and personal shortcomings, of those people of that place who called themselves Christians.

It would take a deal yet to open the eyes of Gervase Bente to the ultimate truth about his wife. He clung to his love for her still. Besides she was married to him, and that meant oaths taken, and to be kept—he was the most conscientious of men—of loving and cherishing her, of being her champion always, of seeing the best of her, of ignoring the gadfly in her, of being confident that the little manifestations of naughtiness,

though too frequent, were but natural ebullitions of a temperament that had been strained and distraught in the sufferings and tumults of the past. Gradually, as the days grew to weeks, and the weeks went by, he was pushed into a position of finding excuses for his wife: and then suddenly realised that he was judging her, and not unjustly. She had gradually and all unconsciously become the grief and the burden of his life: a burden most heavy to be borne.

The discovery appalled him. He was walking through Nuneholm as it came to him: and it caused him such horror and dismay that he fled to solitude, and found it in the church. He happened to have the keys of the place in his possession, and he locked himself in. He sat in a pew, and leaned forward, his forehead resting on the back of his hands, and set himself resolutely to think and to realise facts.

His mind went back to the beginning of their settlement in Nuneholm. There were the troubles between Ellen and his aunt, Ellen and Mrs Carpenter, Ellen and Joseph Carpenter, Ellen and everybody else, it seemed, with whom she came in contact. In most cases on first acquaintance there had been a rapture of enthusiasm, a very glut of gush, admiration tumbled over itself. Geese were swans and pebbles pearls. Then soon, very soon, there followed revulsion of feeling and opinion; and the swans were dirty ducklings, the pearls poison.

He remembered scenes. In the silence and emptiness of the church the vulgar and shocking experiences

revisited him with clearness and mental torture. He had seen his wife in every kind of cruel mood, storming, sneering, contemptuous.

'Dear me!' he said to himself as the truth flashed to him. 'I—I always dread to go home.'

It was indeed so. He recognised it now. The knowledge that at the end of the day's work was no sympathetic welcome, and the possibility of tumult, came as a fierce jar to him. It was the blazing vulgarity of it all that especially oppressed him. To be a party to a row: to be talked-at and abusively condemned for the imaginary or exaggerated slights and rudeness of others: to have insults to himself and every one else hurled at his head by this angry, clever, unscrupulous, irresponsible being—it was horrible, an agony.

He had been gazing with blind eyes at the misty ceiling, and as the consciousness of his personal misery recurred he leaned his head again upon his hands, slipped to his knees, and groaned. He was at that instant an absolutely wretched, lonely man. He had gladly given so much: and here was the harvest and the aftermath. He reached the nadir of humiliation. He bit his lips: he knew the pain of tearless tears.

The momentary expression of emotion brought some relief. Instantly afterwards he was a man again, and the stronger because he had passed through his shame. What was to be done to mend the evil? That was the problem. He sat back on the wooden seat and braced himself to come to a clear decision. How could he meet Ellen, so as to bring her to reason, if not to kindness:

how could he prevent his marriage from coming to shipwreck, and how carry out that sublime mission which for her sake he had accepted? He had vowed to save her from the old dangers and consequences. The task was still before him. He must go on, and go on bravely, with the bitter business, because it was his duty. It was his duty. Duty! He repeated the essential word, impressing it on his tired mind.

It was his duty to bear with her patiently: not to be weak with her, not to give way to her; but to meet her, to insist wherever necessary, and carry his point; to put his meaning briefly and compactly before her —she had a brilliant faculty for catching his words and distorting their intent—and yet always he must be kind and never fail to show that, through all her naughtiness and wickedness he was her loyal husband, lover, friend, ever to be depended on; yearning to cherish and guard her, and to be her proved shield and champion whenever the world might be unkind. It was his duty —that!

The confusion of his thoughts was less. Much of the turmoil was cleared away. He saw the need definitely. He would at once go home: and take up the burden again, accepting the issues, and, through moral strength and tactful consideration, win. He must remember, he told himself, that she was a woman, and therefore inherently gentle and peculiarly sympathetic to kindness. He must remember too, though never reminding her, that however wilful and even dangerous she might be, she was entirely dependent

on him. If he failed her there would be nothing left to her. She might overlook that fact: but never could he.

He let himself out of the church and hurried homeward. As he went he formed plans of future usefulness in which his wife could help. They must involve some measure of entertainment. She was not made for unrelieved stern work or responsibilities. He (poor simpleton!) practised modes of address, little turns of speech by which an angry discussion might be avoided, little compliments. He wished there were women whose friendship would have helped Ellen. In this connection he thought of his aunt: and realised the hopelessness. It was a lonely business he was engaged upon: there was no one else to help him. He alone stood between his Ellen and the deluge.

He wished she could have had a holiday away from Nuneholm. He knew his wife hated the place: she had made that more than sufficiently clear: yet it was not possible for him, and, therefore, for her, to get away from it, for practically a whole year—in fact until the next summer holiday came round. There was not a single person whom she could visit. This, their loneliness, was a great pity, and linked with her dislike of Nuneholm and his inability to discover relief from worry in parochial work, it seemed fatal. There was no alternative to plodding away and being tactful, careful, considerate, affectionate. After all, love was the cure and solace of many earthly ills. Might not his love help Ellen? As he thought of her, in this

ideal version of her loneliness, his heart warmed with pity for the little wife who had been, was, and promised to be, so far out of fortune. She was like a frail bird—so he built the image—who would fly towards challenging danger.

He reached home, and the door was opened to him by Joe Carpenter. This fact was ominous. It was the first time his housekeeper's goodman had come to meet him: though in the garden, where Carpenter worked much, they had often discussed the time of day, the ways of the wind, the promise of the weather, the health of the vegetables, the victories of the flowers, and the madness of mankind.

'Sorry to trouble you,' said Carpenter: 'but there's been another row: and—the Missus can't stand it.'

'This is dreadful,' said Gervase, in very deep and sincere concern. There seemed no end to his worries.

'I'm sorry for you, sir, you are a kind and pleasant gentleman—though I say it to you straight: but Mrs Bente——'

'Come in here,' said Gervase, opening the door of his room. 'Let us have a talk. Is Mrs Bente out?'

'She is, sir: very much out. She damned the Missus and slammed the door. I'm not much of a Christian man myself, sir, and I've no love for the Church—begging your pardon for frankness—but that wasn't the conduct to be expected from the wife of a clergyman.'

'No, no, it wasn't. Oh dear, this is terrible! Come here and let us talk.'

He led the way and pointed to an arm-chair.

'I think I'll stand, sir: and I shan't keep you long.'

'Very well, Carpenter. Now talk out straight to me. Tell me the whole truth, however humiliating to me it may be. Tell me all of it—all: as man to man. I must have the truth, mind you, the truth. Tell me!'

Gervase ranged himself before the mantelpiece: standing stiffly upright, nerving himself for the ordeal, and Carpenter noticed the sadness, the kindness, even the despair, in the young man's face. As he said to his wife afterwards, 'I was all sorry for him. He looked so much more like a man in trouble than a clergyman.'

'Now out with it, Carpenter Talk straight and frankly. I want the whole truth.'

'Very well, sir, I will. Since your lady's been here there's been trouble. Sometimes she was as gentle as a lamb: but that weren't often. More often than you are aware of there've been tantrums and worse. Nothing's been right, sir, sometimes: everything's been wrong, even when the Missus 'as been working her heart out to please the young lady. The food and the furniture, even the birds chirruping in the garden 'ave been condemned as if they were our fault. And it 'asn't only been her words, though that would've been bad enough in any case, for your lady 'as a tongue, sir, if I may say it, a tongue made of vitriol.'

Gervase knew this well enough. He had been burnt many a time by the vitriolic weapon.

'She has struck me, sir—me.'

'Struck you, Carpenter?' Gervase by this time was

quite amazed. He did not grasp the full significance. As he looked at the strong, lined, tanned face of the man before him, and the sinews of his hands and evidence of strength, the idea of violence offered by that bit thing to him seemed preposterous.

'Yes, sir—but I don't complain of that. She hit me with her clenched fist in the face, out there in the garden.'

'But why?'

'I've no more idea than the man in the moon. She'd come down late. The breakfast was getting cold. She stormed at the Missus, called her—but I won't say just what she called my wife—and flew into the garden in a tempest. I was working among the marrows, sir—over there——;' he turned to point out of the window at a particular corner, 'and paying no attention to anything else, when there, Mrs Bente was looking at me, in a fury. I looked up, sir, at once, when she said, "Don't dare to stare at me like that," and punched me with her fist full on the chin.'

'And you, what did you do? I am most deeply sorry.'

'Oh, I couldn't help it, I laughed: it was so stupid: and then of a sudden I got angry—I'm a bit Yorkshire, sir—and said "Go into the house at once," and she turned and went, sir, as obedient as a school-girl.'

'I'm grieved, Mr Carpenter. I cannot tell you how grieved I am.'

'Oh, that's not all, not by a long way: and what Mrs Bente did to me is of no account, except that it's

against discipline. It doesn't do for women to hit out at men—as you would know, sir.' He paused apologetically as though he felt that in moralising thus he was intruding on the curate's province. 'But it's the Missus, who's had to bear the brunt. Mrs Carpenter has lost pounds, sir, pounds, since you've been here: and all because——'

'Tell me exactly what you think we should do?' interrupted the unhappy Gervase. 'I am so anxious to undo what has been done.'

'Oh, that you can't do, Mr Bente; what's done is done till the Day of Judgment. Nobody can undo it.'

'Has she struck Mrs Carpenter?'

'I believe not: but I can't say for certain: the Missus is not one to tell tales.'

'Then let us say she hasn't.'

Gervase was glad to find any plea for the modification of the charges brought against his wife.

'Very well, sir. I don't want to take any one's character away, let alone a lady's: but this I can say and must; Mrs Bente has done crueller things than mere striking. She has done things which a man would not be clever enough or mean enough to do.'

'What do you mean?' For the moment Gervase in his bewilderment was at a disadvantage. 'Speak out!' he then cried. 'Do sit down, Carpenter, and I'll sit down too. I'm tired. Oh, this is a bitter business, a bitter business. To think that I should be here, listening to these accusations of cruelty against my wife and—know it is all true.'

For the moment Gervase had broken through the restraint, under which he had held himself and the agony of the man's heart forced and found expression. He threw himself into the arm-chair. His face was gray and drawn. He knew the uttermost weariness of body, mind, and soul. Joe Carpenter, he recognised, was no common man, although he laboured with his hands and was glad of his poor daily wage: and Bente felt assured that this indictment of Poppy was measured, calm, and not erring on the side of injustice.

'Tell me all, Carpenter, please; without any holding back. I must know all: then perhaps I shall know what to do.'

So Carpenter took a chair by the window, and Gervase, in the manner characteristic to him, hid his face in his hands in order to concentrate the energies of his tired mind on what the other was saying. He interrupted not at all, but listened with strained attention.

It was a mean story of petty selfishness and unbridled angers, of violence and ingratitude, of smiling insincerities which often would change of a sudden to some vulgar outburst, or eager, clever rudeness. It almost seemed as if Poppy had a special spite against Mrs Carpenter, there appeared to be so much needless vindictiveness in her treatment of the housekeeper. Joseph, her husband, certainly was confident that it was so: and although as he spoke and his indignation and anger grew, his voice reflecting their inner fires,

he gave no encouragement to Gervase to believe that bias was causing him to tell worse than the truth.

When Joseph Carpenter had said his say he rose, and Gervase rose too, offering a hand which the other took.

'I am grieved and ashamed,' he said. 'If I could do anything to mend this matter I'd do it, even to losing a hand, that I would.'

'I believe you would, sir;' Carpenter was glad he could say with heartiness.

'And now I fully understand that we must go.'

'Yes, I'm sorry for your sake; but it would be too much for the Missus.'

'It would, it would, that's quite clear; but what to do, beats me. I've not had much experience of this sort of botherment,' he said with an attempt to smile which could not be other than sombre.

'Sir, you have listened to me like a gentleman: may I say one thing more?'

'You may: of course, you may.'

Carpenter pulled at his grizzled beard while he arranged his thoughts.

'There's only one way you can manage Mrs Bente,' he said gruffly.

Gervase was a little startled: but he had listened to Joseph for so long that a little further frankness could not matter.

'Speak on.'

'She's not an or'nery woman, sir. She's one of the extras.'

'I dare say she is abnormal,' he confessed. 'Let me

tell you, Carpenter, what you and your wife cannot know, and it is some excuse, that Mrs Bente has had an extraordinarily unhappy and difficult past: for years she has had to fight a hard battle bravely, and has done it. If you knew everything about her, as I do, if you knew even half what I do, you'd probably be as sorry for her as I am, and as eager to find excuses for her and a power of pity. But——'

'But, sir,' the other took him up, 'things are what they are; and nothing of the past can excuse her actions now—and the swearing, sir, the swearing, it's that which upsets the Missus. Besides, she struck me in the face.'

'I know,' Gervase exclaimed with despair.

'Yes, sir: and that's the moral, as they call it in the children's story-books.'

'The moral, what do you mean?'

'The only way you can manage her is by force—yourself, sir.'

'Oh, force?—I?—impossible!'

'Gospel truth, sir, all the same. I hate to say ill of any one. I wouldn't hit a son of mine unless by his badness he simply kept asking for it: but there are some natures in animals, boys and women and men, who can't understand gentleness and kindness. It's beyond 'em, sir. I've seen a lot of it in life. They only understand hard knocks: it's the only thing that appeals to them, the one thing they respect!'

'If you suggest I'm to thrash Mrs Bente you've shown you don't know me.' Gervase was short with him and

coldly indignant. The preposterous suggestion caused him for the moment to forget his troubles and sorrow. 'The idea's detestable.'

'Well, sir, it's been kind of you to let me talk to you outright, and I know you're a gentleman: but, believe me, that young lady of yours needs a governing hand. I don't want to tell you these plain truths—I'd rather not: but it's the plain truth all the same. Beat her, sir, and she may love you. Don't beat her, let her go on as she goes on, and she'll break your heart.' He moved to the door. 'That's all I've got to say, and thank you for letting me say it: and if you can conveniently leave these rooms on Saturday, the Missus and I, though sorry to lose yourself, sir, would be much obliged.'

Gervase was left alone. He went to the window and looked at the garden which during these few Nuneholm months had often given him its cheer and its peace.

'Impossible!' he said again, and so dismissed Carpenter's suggestion.

But what now? he asked himself: and at the moment had no answer.

CHAPTER XIX

GERVASE waited some time for Poppy to come in; it was past the usual hour—so far as anything concerning the movements of that lady could be called usual; but she did not return. In his excitement and growing indignation, the condition of suspense, already irksome, grew positively intolerable. As he had done before the fatal decision of marriage, so now he decided—to walk it off.

He went out. There was no sign of Ellen approaching, so he turned towards The Height on his way to the hills where there were greenness and breezes and a healing silence. As luck would have it, Bente had not gone a hundred yards up the slope whereon the starched superlatives dwelt, when he met the Rector and Mrs Deane. They greeted him with coldness.

'Aha!' said the Doctor, without any of his customary exhilaration, 'we've been talking about you. We want to have a talk with you—at least I must. Can you come to the Rectory for half an hour?'

This was unfortunate. Gervase was so eager to be with his battles on the hills that any interruption was unwelcome.

'Might I come later?' he begged. 'I'm rather troubled just at present, and want to think things out.'

He was sorry he had said so much when he caught the inquiring gleam in Mrs Deane's eyes. It put him on guard.

'Perhaps the Rector could help you,' she suggested.

'Yes, oh yes,' said the Doctor of Divinity, taking his cue from her.

'He was going to talk to you about Mrs Bente,' the lady continued.

'My wife?' said Gervase to gain time for thought. It was new to him to need to be diplomatic in his own concerns. He had had no cause for disingenuousness before he met Ellen.

'Yes, my dear Bente, there are one or two things that want clearing up,' the Rector declared. 'We—I mean I—am rather in the dark as to, well, one or two little things . . . When can you make it convenient to talk?'

'Why not now?' challenged his wife, who, spoilt by years of unchallenged authority, could not feel that she was ever out of place.

'Excellent, my dear!' said the Rector. 'Come at least part of the way with us, Bente. Come along.'

Gervase turned with them. He felt that what must be might as well be now; but deliberately refrained from speaking, as he was not disposed either to invite or to offer words about Ellen.

Even then, it was Mrs Deane who began the discussion.

'The trouble is this, Mr Bente: there must have been some misunderstanding. Mrs Bente is—everybody can see it—not what we may call a religious woman; and it is most important that the wife of the curate should be identified with his parish work.'

'That is so,' Gervase agreed: 'but when the Rector and I talked things over originally, he——'

'Oh!' snapped the little lady interrupting. She was sharply furious because it seemed to her as if he were trying to ignore her right to intervene, as he might well have done, but in fact was not doing. 'The Rector consults me in everything!'

'I didn't suggest—I didn't for a moment mean——'

'I am the trusted confidante of the Doctor,' she went on, being disinclined to spare him: so nettled was she.

'My dear,' protested the Rector in his most soothing accents, 'Mr Bente, I'm sure, didn't mean any reflection on you or your splendid usefulness to me and the parish, did you, Bente?'

'Of course not!' A little of the old Adam was by this time awake and kicking in Gervase. He was impatient with the woman. Two months of Poppy had certainly marred the temper which was naturally gentle and cheerful: and the last hour's experience with Joseph Carpenter had already ruffled it severely.

'I meant no reflection at all upon you, but what I meant to say was that when the Rector and I had our original conference there was no mention of my wife. As a matter of fact, she has had no experience of parochial work—no experience whatever; and it is

not to be expected that in fervour and efficiency she should emulate—others.'

'Mrs Bente has done no parochial work: not worked with you?' asked Mrs Deane, and there was pounce in her words; while the Rector, knowing his wife in her difficult hours, eyed her with anxiety.

'Certainly not!' Gervase was emphatic.

'Not worked at all?—done no social service?' Her nose seemed to have become sharper; she looked like a weasel scenting prey.

Gervase was puzzled by this insistence. He began to fear—as was the case—that Ellen had made some statement which had put the Rector's wife on a false, but dangerous, track.

'I do not understand you, Mrs Deane,' he said simply.

'It is curious, very curious—as we said,' she remarked pointedly to her husband. 'Do you positively tell me, Mr Bente, that your wife did no work whatever in the parish of St Brendan?'

'Come, come, my dear!' the Rector counselled. He thought she was going too far, was usurping his authority. She flashed him a glance which he took, and thereupon subsided.

Gervase felt his anger surging up. This cross-examination was such bad form, so particularly unpardonable in a woman of breeding as he imagined Mrs Deane to be, that his natural diffidence to assert himself was forgotten.

'I don't think I need repeat the denials I have already made,' he answered with a bow.

There was silence for a moment. Both the Rector and his lady were digesting his denials, as they approached and reached the corner of the road that led to the Church and Rectory.

'Will you please tell me precisely what it was you wished to speak to me about?' Gervase asked his chief.

'Just—this!' was the rather airy answer with the wave of a graceful hand.

'About Mrs Bente?'

'Yes, my dear fellow: but here we are——' he swung open the Rectory gate—'do come in!'

Gervase thought he would, and followed Mrs Deane. As he passed the Rector, he felt his arm taken and squeezed. It was like a rapid message of sympathy between boys about to be carpetted, but the grave expression on the Rector's face did not relax. The hidden message had no effect on Gervase, who was indeed highly puzzled and a bit angered by the turn things were taking. At the same time he felt that in some way Ellen was threatened; and instinctively prepared to protect her.

The Rector led him to the study. Mrs Deane went with them. Gervase felt that was a further intrusion: that her behaviour was a serious breach of professional etiquette. The lady was, however, evidently aware of this, for as soon as they were within the room, she asked her husband if she should stay.

'Please, my dear!' was the obedient answer.

She at once took her seat and was prudent enough not at once to interfere.

'My dear Bente,' said the Rector, with no loss of time, 'it has occurred to us—we were indeed forced to be aware of it, that your wife—charming though she is, very charming—is not happily sharing our work. Now tell me, why is that?'

'She has not the religious temperament,' said Gervase thoughtfully.

'Dear me! Very unfortunate, very!'

The comment stung Bente to indignation.

'May I ask why this interest has suddenly been taken in my wife's want of parochial zeal? She is not the only woman in the parish who is—well, not especially zealous.'

His words were edged and energetic. He was angry with an anger impossible to him in the old St Brendan days. He was feeling the contrast of this personal interference with the inability of the Rector to rise to his real opportunity .

'Ah!' cried Dr Deane, raising the index finger of his right hand. 'There is plenty of lethargy in the parish, as, before now, you and I have lamented; but the curate's wife has a position and a responsibility not shared by the other ladies and only exceeded by——' he indicated his wife by a graceful gesture. 'How can we expect our people to go to Church and be devout, when the wife of one of the clergymen is habitually absent?'

Gervase was conscious of wrath rising within him. He had probably always possessed a quick temper —it was an aspect of his eager crusading zeal—and in

the old days it was easily subdued; but the life in Nuneholm had tried him. There was a nerve-storm in the making. He hated stress and strife, loathed instinctively anything of the nature of a misunderstanding; but his anger had already been on the march when he met the Dunstan Deanes. Its flame was fed through this interview, for what chiefly angered him and made the gall rise, until it threatened to choke him, was the fact that these very people whose ideals proved so dead, whose views were so worldly, whose efforts for good were so lethargic, whose aspirations were so material, whose claims to be religious were so unjustified, should take upon themselves to be judges, and have the words of condemnation on their lips. If the Rector had been truly a good man, a man of God, striving to make his parish worthy of his creed, it would have been different. Gervase might then, and would, because he could trust him, have confided in him everything: but here was only a platitudinous conventionalist, incapable of wielding any tremendous trust. Gervase determined to keep his secret.

Mrs Deane was unable longer to resist her eagerness to speak. 'The Rector ought to know exactly what Mrs Bente did before she came here.'

She had said so little; she had said too much. The nerve-storm burst. Gervase lost the last of his store of patience. He threw away restraint, even gladly. The very guard he had kept upon himself in the years of his discipline made the present abandonment the more blessed. Mrs Deane had gone too far.

'I am only answerable to the Rector in this parish and to no one else,' he answered and the quiet of his tone did not hide or disguise his indignation.

'You are excessively rude,' she flashed, and turned a furious red.

'Tut—tut!' said the Doctor, who knew nothing else to say.

'I am only answerable to the Rector,' Gervase repeated with emphatic firmness.

She looked at her husband in appeal, perhaps in threat. He fumbled and hawed. He was caught on the prongs of a horrible dilemma—but not for long. Married life had brought him discipline. His wife was his only master: and, although he had still sufficient decency to feel ashamed of his decision, he said without hesitation, 'My dear Bente, my dear Bente! Mrs Deane is, as the wife of a clergyman should be, her husband's absolute helpmeet.'

The lady breathed a sigh of intense satisfaction that after approaching defeat it was, nevertheless, victory.

Gervase was shocked.

'Helpmeet, yes, surely; but this—this is a matter of concern between us as clergymen: it concerns the religious side of the parish.'

'My dear Bente,' said the Rector again, as he struggled to recover his blandness, 'what concerns the parish must concern my helpmeet, my wife and colleague, as it does me. The Bishop, I may tell you, has always recognised the wonderful efficiency and co-operation of Mrs Deane.'

Gervase rose slowly and went to the door. He was pale but perfectly calm.

'Then I must decline to be a party to this conference; and also to answer any questions you may ask about my wife.'

Without having realised it earlier, he recognised now that, through this decision, he escaped the pit that had yawned before him. Ellen's secret was safe. Mrs Deane's intrusiveness had spoilt her object. The discovery brought him relief of heart.

'And still it will be the duty of the Rector to ask them,' she said.

Gervase bowed and opened the door.

'Wait a moment, Bente,' cried his chief who at last was roused on his own account. His tones were more decisive than usual. 'You can regard Mrs Deane as not present.'

'Impossible!' said Gervase.

'I am the judge of what is proper. I happen to be your superior officer.' The subordinate bowed again. 'I can at least ask if Mrs Bente intends at any time to help in the work of the parish?'

'And I may as well answer at once that she does not!'

'She does not!' the Rector echoed, while his wife opened her lips to speak; but guided by an unusual prudence forthwith re-closed them.

'I think you ought to tell me why,' he protested weakly.

But Gervase was convinced to the opposite. 'Not under the present circumstances,' he said.

'Under other circumstances, you would do so, I suppose?'

Gervase thought a moment then he answered, 'Perhaps; but the questions you raise are too intimate for general discussion.'

At this the Rector's lady pricked up her ears. The weasel was in chase again. Once more she gave her husband a meaning glance; but he was now too wise or weak to show himself aware of it.

'Was she a religious woman, did she do religious work at any time before she came with you here?'

Again Gervase paused to consider. Was it better to refuse to answer or, without committing himself or Ellen, to make a general reply. He came to a decision and answered simply, 'No.'

The weasel pounced.

'But she told me herself,' cried Mrs Deane, 'when first we talked together, that she had laboured with you for the raising of fallen women.'

She had won her effect. Gervase was plainly staggered by this assertion. He was beaten to momentary confusion. Why had Ellen told a futile and dangerous lie? The thought raced and repeated itself in his brain during those catastrophic moments. The folly and the unkindness of it; the disloyalty and the impossibility! He saw then that he was forced to play a losing game. He was meeting swords and armour with naked hands. He would say nothing more. That was best.

'Is that a fact, Bente?' asked the Rector.

'I don't think it is fair that I should be asked to give the lie to my wife,' was the stiff reply.

There was no getting beyond that. Mrs Deane realised it before her husband did: and she had won her point. The curate was hiding something: he was afraid to tell the full truth about his wife. If he could have denied that Ellen's claim was untrue would he have hesitated for a moment to do so? What could her past have been, that it needed all this mystery? Anyhow, she was proved a liar and that was something.

Mrs Deane was filled with joy that was most unholy. She had won her point. Out of his silence and obstinacy Gervase had virtually condemned Ellen. And—Mrs Deane gloated in thought over the assertion—she had helped to raise 'fallen women!' Even then, when she was hot on the scent, near to the quarry, she had not the faintest suspicion of the real truth. As with Mrs Fryth-Willyams, so with her, the fates held the dark secret; and those intolerably good women were deprived of the tremendous satisfaction of striking with the sword of their righteousness that militant sinner.

'Perhaps Mr Bente would like to think things over,' Mrs Deane suggested to her husband.

'Yes,' he agreed eagerly. 'Think things over, Bente!'

'I will,' said he.

'Perhaps you might care to write to me.'

Gervase gazed thoughtfully at his chief, who was

looking pretty uncomfortable in spite of his nominal victory.

'I suppose I shall have to write to you. I will do as you bid me, and think it over. I quite realise,' he added as an afterthought, 'that this probably involves my resignation.'

'Oh, don't say that!' protested the Rector, with the full-blown ardour, his characteristic, which in reality meant so little.

'Perhaps Mrs Bente may see things differently, and after all work with us.' So Mrs Deane offered her opinion, in the words though hardly in the spirit of peacefulness.

Gervase felt this was merely the unhelpful reopening of the vexed question and decided not to answer. Instead, he bowed formally, separately, to each in turn; then opened the door and went.

'A headstrong fellow!' was the Rector's verdict. Mrs Deane answered nothing. She hurried to her room upstairs and slammed the door.

'Dear me!' said the Rector when he heard that evidence of nerves and temper. 'Oh, dear me!' Then he looked at the clock, and sighed again.

There was a wilderness of time before dinner.

CHAPTER XX

ALMOST by instinct Gervase Bente turned again towards The Height and the hills beyond.

The problems he had set out to wrestle with were further still from settlement, and now seemed multiplied a thousand-fold. The difficulties associated with Ellen alone seemed sufficient to break a giant; to find poised on the top of them this new difficulty, of having to go seek another curacy and sphere of work, or else submit to the intolerable intrusions of the Rector's wife into most intimate affairs, was surely the proverbial last straw on the proverbial strained back. Yet the very impossibility of the burden had the effect of cheering him. It was so bad that any change must be better. There is always that comfort in despair.

Not that he was in despair for a moment. He had always the consolation of his religion and the faith that can move mountains. This was perhaps a little accentuated through his troubles. The potential fanaticism that had always been a part of his nature was more than a possibility now; its seeds were energising within him, there was a hint and a strain of it in his present attitude. The futility of the Church in that

parish and the impossibility of wakening the Rector to the real needs, had already driven Gervase nearer to the extreme. Contemplating the new difficulties, vicious as they were, he began to feel that ordinary means were insufficient. He braced his shoulders and stepped out. To the hills of consideration and definition of intention.

'The very man! How d'ye do, Mr Bente?'

It was Temble. Gervase felt at the moment of interruption that he absolutely detested the masculine voice and dominating personality of this forceful gentleman, who smiled so widely and had such complete self-confidence.

'Good-evening, Mr Temble,' he answered with the quiet courtesy, his characteristic.

'Off for a walk?' the sidesman asked.

'Yes, I've got some serious things to think about.'

'Ah, that's nothing new for you clergymen. Going to stretch your legs on the hills, I suppose?'

'Yes, so I intended.'

'Good! Nothing like a long walk to clear up things. You look a bit peaky; you work too hard, you know.'

Gervase was disposed to pass on, and Temble's remark hardly called for comment. But the sidesman was not yet done with. 'A long walk,' he advised, 'that will clear up the cobwebs. Stretch your legs —that's my medicine.'

Thereupon Mr Temble looked at his watch, and said 'George! I must be off,' jerked a familiar head in

farewell, and went, smiling broadly as soon as his back was turned. He felt a clever fellow.

The intervention of Temble, brief though it was, proved an annoyance to Gervase. There seemed something even sinister in his manner of address. Bente realised this; then brushed the idea aside. To judge a man for so superficial a cause was uncharitable indeed. But though the idea was brushed aside it left a stain behind; and Gervase was confident, instinctively, that something about Mr Temble was not merely antipathic and disagreeable to him; but actually dangerous. Nor during the rest of the evening was he free from the unpleasant impression.

'No more interruptions!' said Gervase to himself, as he braced his energies anew to the ordeal of the hills.

That very moment he was aware of a red, forbidding countenance, pierced with the cold eyes of determinate non-recognition. It was Mrs Fryth-Willyams emerging from the gate of The Cedars. He raised his hat and was cut dead.

'Ellen!' he said. It was the voice of his instinct, not the voice of his thoughts; for he had been entirely unaware of any friction between his wife and the hostess of the garden-party.

He was not interrupted again. He was free to meet his troubles, and he fought with them. It was hardly an occasion of clear thinking, and the ordering of confusion. Gervase found himself caught in such a tangle of troubles that there seemed no unravelling the skein; and, bound as he was by almost a frantic idealism,

there was for him no cutting the knot in the heroic manner of Alexander. He could only think and think; and think ever confusedly of this circumstance or of that in the inordinate pother that overwhelmed him.

He was able to come to no decision, for as soon as one process seemed clearing, other considerations, sometimes grotesquely discordant, intervened; and the possible clarification was lost in new mists and thickets.

The chief trouble was always Poppy. She was such an unknown, such a wilful, quantity. How she had spent her time that day, and what she was doing now, he was ignorant of—though Temble might have enlightened him. Her plans for the future, if they existed, were no more mysterious than her present intentions. Her only programme seemed to be all-of-a-sudden, and based upon the fabric of a whim—what would cause the greatest difficulty and unpleasantness to others, with her husband always remembered as the prime butt of her grown vindictiveness.

Despite the confusedness of those processes of consideration one aspect of his problem grew more definite, and that was the hopelessness of Poppy. He noticed now, what a man of more worldly growth would have seen as soon as the first illusions of marriage had worn away: that she was bound by nature to bring her husband to grief. She kept no restraint on her bad inclinations, which were legion; and she had unusually few good inclinations to counteract them. She was in fact—he realised it now with eyes stripped—an innately bad woman, rotten to the core, answering as

readily to the promptings of iniquity as flowers to light; yet even with his illusions about her gone and her barrenness of soul as evident as darkness, he found excuses for her. He still loved her, partly because of her very hopelessness and moral helplessness; and he still found excuse for her because of the years of harshness and corruption she had endured. The fact that Ellen was his wife, and that her burden had therefore become his, was claim enough on the charity and chivalry of this man who was a gentleman, and moreover a clergyman who practised better than he preached.

Perhaps the true reason why Gervase Bente, when ultimately he reached again his ill-starred home, was so little 'forrarder' in his decisions, was that he had come to believe the worst barrier to his and Ellen's happiness and usefulness was the futility of the Church in Nuneholm. He began to find a slender hope, which grew as he thought of it, that had the religious life there been more real and serviceable she would have been better induced to work for its causes.

It was, of course, a foolish idea, the forlorn conjecture of a defeated optimist; but he clung to it with the blind determination of the desperate idealist. Rapidly the thought outgrew its proportions. His innate faculty for fanaticism associated itself with the idea, which spread as the weeds of thought—as well as the weeds of the garden—do. When Gervase, therefore, found himself at home again, with his mental and physical energies worn to threads, he brought with

him, in a great garnering of vagueness, one certainty —that Ellen was, at least in part, deprived of her true chance, because the Church in that district had been negligent, lukewarm, and therefore sinful. He had, for the time being, lost sight of her corruption in the last surge of pity the new idea evoked.

She greeted him in the doorway. She beamed and seized his arm.

'Darling, where *have* you been? You are tired, aren't you?'

He was taken aback. Even now, after months of experience of Poppy, he was not prepared for this amazing *volte face* and violent advance of affection. He had, anyhow, learned its value. It rather hardened him and put him on guard.

'Ellen, we are in trouble again.'

'Oh, Gervase, my dear!' She might have been a creature all sorrow and love, to judge by her demeanour. Bente was not so crude now as to take her at her own valuation. He was at any rate cautious.

'Perhaps you won't be quite so sympathetic when you hear all I have to say,' his lips were firm, his expression grim, for him.

He hung his hat and coat on the hall-stand, and followed her into their sitting-room. The lamp was lighted and the curtains drawn. The little room looked snug enough; and it grieved him to think that soon they must go and it would be their home no longer, for Gervase had a faculty for loving the places with which he had grown familiar.

Poppy disliked the tone of his last remark, not because it was in the least unkind; but for the reason that it was not atune to her own effusiveness. Gervase saw her face harden. Her demeanour changed, it was nearer to habitude. It was just as well so, for it stiffened his intentions, and he could not afford now to yield anything to sentimentality.

'I hope you don't intend to be insulting,' she challenged. Her tone was nasty. He felt the sudden agitation of anger, a flutter in nerves and throat. It was a sign of change; it would have been impossible to his temperament in the years before marriage; but the experience, even of these last hours, had wrought upon him and bruised his nature. Poppy had no inkling of these inner fires. She saw him calm with the apparent coldness that she hated. She regarded it as due to want of manliness, to lack of passion.

'I'm sick of you, Gervase,' she said.

'Never mind that,' he replied. 'Whether you like it or not we are in a difficulty which we've to get out of together. '

'And I'm sick of your difficulties too.'

It would be easy to retort that the difficulties were of her making; but to offer that sort of answer was not his wish or way. He kept his mind to the purpose.

'We have to leave these rooms,' he told her.

'Then I'm not going to,' she airily replied.

'What?' The tone of the monosyllable expressed something of his sheer amazement. He had thought he could not be surprised by any act or decision of his

wife; but this proved him wrong. Could there have been a more absolute somersault?

'I am not going to; and that is plain English.' She picked up a novelette as if to change the subject; but was far too excited even to pretend to read.

'But you said—you always declared—that you——'

'Oh, stop your mumbling! I say now that Nuneholm suits me, and these rooms suit me; and I am going to stay here. That's all!'

'You are not going to stay here.'

That was better. She flashed him a glance almost of respect because of the decision of those words.

'I am not going to leave Nuneholm,' she repeated. 'Please understand that—I am absolutely clear about it.'

'You will go where I go,' he proclaimed. 'But I'm not asking you to leave Nuneholm.'

She sounded defiance—not too defiantly.

'Oh really!'

'But why this change?—this sudden change?'

She was in her turn unprepared for the challenge. It was not enough to say 'Because I choose it'; as she could not but see that if he used his rights, which, for aught she knew, this altered Gervase might do, her choice was of small concern. It was as he suggested, where he went she must go, unless she had the means of self-support; and she did not possess those means at present.

'Why this change? Tell me! Why don't you answer me?' he persisted sharply.

'Isn't the fact that I do not wish to go enough?'

'No.' His tone was unusually blunt. 'You have been discontented here; rude and violent to Mrs Carpenter, rude and violent to Joseph, rude and violent to me——'

'Oh *you*, you fool!' She turned on her chair away from him, so giving point to her expression of contempt.

'Yes, to me; and simply because I said we must stay here.'

'Very well, we will stay here. I'm sick of this fuss. You'd better wash your hands and change your coat if you want some supper——'

This single attempt to ride away on a side issue failed of its purpose. It annoyed him. In his impatience he took a step towards her. At the movement she shrunk back, as if she expected a blow. That act of combined insult and cowardice—it was in truth far more insult than cowardice—spurred his anger and set the seeds of a new contempt. It was destined to alter their relations entirely. It was the beginning of the end of his old protective love for her.

'You need not fear I shall ever strike you,' he said.

'But I do fear it.' Her retort was ever ready. She had a keen and intent answer when its burden was unkindly.

'Oh, Ellen, what a beast you are!'

She laughed at that; not in humour or bitterness. It was merely an escape of emotion.

'Why don't you act decently and talk decently?' he protested hotly. 'You make life so difficult.'

She curled a lip; but he would not heed it.

'Why can't you see how closely linked our interests are? I don't want to give you anything but a happy life; but you won't let me. I ask you to let me do my work here without worry or hindrance; but we have these squabbles and quarrels and complaints. I cannot do my work, can do no good at all, in this atmosphere of worry and vulgarity——'

She became restless again.

'Oh, do stop preaching, Gervase! If you'd talk less and do more your work would be less of a failure. For you are a failure you know: yes, an absurd failure.'

He looked at her with gentle eyes. This asseveration was peculiarly hurtful. She saw it, and was encouraged to go on, sowing her seed of poison.

'You are a perfect laughing-stock here, in Nuneholm, because of your absurd seriousness.'

'Never mind that!' he said.

'But I do mind. I don't want my husband to be a butt. Only yesterday a—a person here said to me "Why is Mr Bente so woodenly theatrical in the pulpit?" That's nice, isn't it?'

'You need not worry about that,' he said again.

'But I do!' she insisted.

'Then don't; we have something more important to think about. In fact, Ellen, it's time we decided what to do. We can't stay here.'

'Oh, yes, we can, dear.' Her mood was not affectionate, though her words might seem so. Gervase

was in any case not to be caught again by the bait and hook of her blandishment. 'I'll speak to Mrs Carpenter. I know how to manage her.'

'The least you say to Mrs Carpenter the better,' he counselled.

'Why must you be brutal at once?' she protested. 'As soon as I show a little kindness you are beastly. You are!' she reiterated, and the spite of anger rose like bubbling froth within her. 'You are a beastly man!'

'You have angered Mrs Carpenter beyond forgiveness,' he assured her.

'Nonsense! I'll soon talk the old fool round.'

'I'm afraid that's beyond your powers, Ellen. You have gone too far——'

'Oh, do stop this preaching. You'll make me swear!' she interrupted, and rose and went to the window. 'I don't care if we do go. Don't care a damn. You can manage it yourself. I'm going out.'

'No, you are not!' He moved in front of the door, and to emphasise the truth of her present subordination turned the key, locked it.

'What are you going to do now, you fool?' She looked in her smallness and, as she happened to be more tastefully dressed, her daintiness, very like a fairy gone bad: but Gervase in those minutes of stress saw only the nasty, small, spiteful woman, who had betrayed his purpose in regard to her.

'I'm going to settle with you!' he answered. 'I've had enough of this nonsense.'

'I shall scream,' she threatened, and hurried to the

front window. She tried to open it; but fumbled with the latch. The fastening was stiff.

'You can scream as much as you like: but, meanwhile, you'll listen to me.'

She did not scream: she struck with her fist a pane of the window, with no effect but to hurt herself; and then she turned at bay. She looked at him with furious eyes, and swore at him. Never before had Gervase Bente heard, far less endured, such a torrent of vulgarity and verbal violence. Poppy let herself go: the vials of her wrath were emptied on him and the issue was garbage. The utter, absolute wickedness, filth, immorality of her tortured, tangled personality poured forth, in worse than gutter riot.

All the effect on Bente was that he turned white. That was the only expression of his horror and pain. He let her speak until she had exhausted her passion of vituperation.

'And now you'll listen to me,' he repeated.

She looked at him, whimpered, then suddenly ran at him furiously, struck him with her fists, tried to reach his face: and once she bit at the hand with which he held her back. She writhed and struggled; and panted in his arms: was a fury and a termagant, a witch maddened and maddening. But he remained calm, and so he mastered her. At last she was limp, exhausted mentally and physically. He held her until she was quiet, and then led her to the sofa where she sat, hid her face against its pillow and moaned. It was the whimpering of an animal.

CHAPTER XXI

'AND now you will listen to me,' said Gervase, emphatically once more.

This time there was no answer. Poppy was subdued. She made no interruption while he put plainly before her the facts of their case. He found it rather a difficult story without the spur of her interruptions and naughtiness: but at anyrate it enabled him to clear his own mind of domestic doubts; and, however difficult the task proved, it seemed strangely brief when shorn of argumentative trimmings.

'We shall have to leave here at the end of this month, if not this week,' he concluded, 'and if I can't find somewhere else suitable to go to meanwhile, we shall have to put up at The Willows. I'm sorry, but there's no other course. You'll have to be decent to Aunt Grace then,' he added gently.

Poppy made no response of any kind.

'Now I have finished,' he said, hoping, hoping, ever hoping, there would be some sign of relenting, some promise of co-operation on the part of this difficult woman.

No sign: no softening. As soon as he had done she rose and without casting a glance at him went to the

door. She turned the handle and waited while he followed and unlocked it for her. She went upstairs. He heard the door of their bedroom slam.

Shortly afterwards he heard a timid knock. It was Mrs Carpenter, looking concerned. Their supper, which was the layman's dinner with an added sobriety and simpleness, had been waiting, and was not improving with the flight of hours.

'I can't help it, Mrs Carpenter,' he answered. He was trembling. 'I can't possibly eat anything: but you might go up and tell Mrs Bente.' Mrs Carpenter seemed to falter at that—'She will be nice to you now, I think,' he added wistfully.

'Oh, but, sir—the hours you've gone——'

'It's no good, Mrs Carpenter, thank you,'—and seizing his hat he went, not to the hills now, but slowly to The Willows, the house of his aunt. He went slowly, because of his physical exhaustion.

Poppy did not deny herself so resolutely as he had done. It is true she ate but little: she let Mrs Carpenter know why—the food was cold, ill-cooked, cheap and nasty.

In spite of her asseverations to Gervase she did not spare the hapless landlady. But though she ate little, she managed to consume a good deal of claret, expressing as she did so some wishes that were nobody's good health. Then as a sudden resolution, she put on her hat and cloak, and went out of the house.

She was still out when Gervase returned an hour and a half later. He was dead to the world, so weary was

he. He lay, with eyes closed, on the sofa, absolutely exhausted: and ached in every limb. He was mentally numb, too tired to think consistently: so that when Poppy did return and look in, and go out again with contempt eloquent on her silent lips, he could only smile sadly to himself and feel rather pleasantly sorry that he was caught in the turmoil of so ugly a business.

That night, not for the first time, he fetched a carriage-rug and slept upon the sofa; while his wife loudly locked their bedroom door.

When they met at the breakfast table she showed they were not to be on speaking terms. She helped him and herself to coffee without a word or sign of recognition, and accepted bacon and a boiled egg with the indifference of a philosopher. Indignation did not prevent her making an excellent breakfast.

During the meal a note came from the Rector—the handwriting was his, but the diction was less grandiose—it was a direct and business-like document. The Rev. Gervase Bente was asked to go round to the Rectory as soon as possible that morning. The note was marked 'Urgent.'

Gervase decided not to hurry. The strain of yesterday caused him to feel jaded to-day. He would take his time. There was no knowing what new earthquake had occurred to upset his uncertain firmament: he must at any rate get his wits in order, and that was not easy in this new condition of abounding worry and weariness of mind and heart-ache. He forced himself to eat an apple: and then, while Poppy lighted a

cigarette and looked at a picture-newspaper, he went into the garden: and there grew calm again.

'This won't do!' he told himself, as he realised how shaken his nerves had been. 'If I get worrying so much I shall be ill,' he reasoned. 'I've got to fight this battle through; and I will not throw her over, at any cost!'

He went in to get his hat: and after thinking for a moment decided not to leave without saying a word to his wife. If she was ashamed at all it would help her, and perhaps make her happier . . . He longed to be friends with her again.

He looked in at the breakfast-room door. She glanced up to see who it was, then turned away deliberately at once: blew a cloud from her cigarette and with a flick of her little finger removed the ash.

'I'm just going out, Ellen. I've to go round to the Rectory.'

'You may go to the devil, for me,' she answered sweetly.

The neatness and discourtesy of her reply touched an unwonted chord. He could not refrain from a little laugh. It was a foolishness, but involuntary. It seemed to relieve his nerves. It was probably the outlet of pent-up emotion. It angered her. She had hoped to hurt him, and here was he with laughter on his lips. She called out a word of offence: it was vulgarity of the worst; it was the bluntest and nastiest in her vocabulary. He heard it and did not mind it; for—he did not fully understand its ugly meaning. He thought it was merely a vulgarity.

On the way to the Rectory he passed the stream of City men going to the railway-station. Some of them he nodded to; and then he met Temble. Instinctively he shrank from saluting this man; but courtesy compelled, and he said, 'Good-day.'

He was glad he had done so afterwards, though at the beginning he was bitterly sorry: for the immediate acknowledgment was an insult. Temble looked at him with his dark eyes, smiling in obvious contempt; and then he went on, saying nothing. Gervase felt a blow on the heart. What new evil was here? What was the cause of this evident insult? Although he went on his way seemingly calm, he was for slow moments numbed. The unkindness had come at the worst moment. The world seemed falling around him.

Then sudden anger blazed in him. He would not be insulted with impunity. The fact that he had instinctively disliked Temble added sting to the treatment he had suffered. He turned on his heel and hurried after the sidesman, who was now a short street's length away. . . .

And then he turned again, realising his own futility for this ugly order of experience. What could he do or gain by a row in the street?

He went without further let to the Rectory; and arrived there wrought-up to a fine whirl of anger. He was not in the mood for pomposities and trifling: so he thought as he swung open the wooden gate of the garden.

The Rector was looking grave and did not receive his visitor with the wonted effusiveness.

'I'm worried, Bente,' he said hurriedly: 'and, look here, you won't mind my wife being present also, will you? She's been my secretary, so to speak, for so long —that to tell the truth I've got to need her co-operation in a difficult business like this. Do you see? It's not a question of principle but of convenience, eh?'

'I'm sorry, I can't, Rector; I'm really very sorry; but I can't.'

'But really I do beg you, earnestly.'

Gervase was so touched by this confession of dependence that, putting aside anger and all else, he seriously considered for a moment, and then again decided not. It was no use. Dr Deane watched him with evident anxiety, and Gervase could not but realise even then that here was no capable minister, but the wrong man in a wrong place, a weak man, misusing the greatest of responsibilities, the cure of souls; and making it a windy emptiness, a clerical attitude.

'I'm really very sorry; but it is a question of principle.'

'Very well!'

The Rector went to the door, and said to one outside 'Nina!' What a name for her, Gervase thought. 'I'm sorry it's No!'

There was no reply. The silence was eloquent enough.

They took their seats, Dr Deane at his desk facing the light, with Gervase in an arm-chair by the window.

'I had your note,' said Gervase, 'and came as soon as I could.'

'That's good of you,' answered his nominal chief more cheerfully: 'now look here, my dear Bente'—Gervase saw him quietly refer to a half-sheet of paper on which prepared notes were scrawled—'we—that is, I—have been thinking over our talk of last night. You were rather outspoken, you know. When I was a curate, I'd as soon have thought—but never mind that. Now look here, Mr Bente, I don't want to lose you. We've had our little differences: but you suit the tone of this place——'

'I'm afraid not!'

'Oh yes, you do, I assure you. You have culture: you have been to Oxford; there's nothing our people like so much as a good manner: it accounts for half our influence in the parish.' He glanced again at the paper of notes. 'Now I don't want to lose you: and because last night things rather promised a break, I sent you that note this morning to ask you to come and have a talk. But there must be one condition. That must be clear at the outset. Mrs Bente's position in the parish must be put on a satisfactory basis. We don't insist on her joining in the work, if that's not her way. The curate's wife, whenever there has been a wife in the past, has always helped in the Sunday-school, and the visiting; and had I known that Mrs Bente could not help, I'm afraid I shouldn't have chosen you as my colleague; but we've got to take things as we find them, haven't we?'

Gervase nodded his head in affirmation. He was indisposed to speak until he had something helpful to say.

'Yes, we've got to take things as we find them.' The Rector refreshed his memory with more than usual deliberation at this point; he placed the half-sheet frankly in front of him. 'And it is clear as anything that Mrs Bente—not to put it unkindly—does not see eye to eye with us as to the responsibilities of her position. Now we want to keep you, my dear Bente: but it must be on the understanding that Mrs Bente does nothing subversive to the Cloth—our Cloth and sacred calling.'

'But what do you mean by this?' Gervase asked.

The Rector showed he possessed an excellent choice of words: but he was not too definite.

'The point is this,' he went on, 'and I'm sorry to have to make it: but Mrs Bente has not been passive—not been passive, much less friendly, by any means. Some of the ladies of the parish, and our best supporters, are highly offended with her. She has put them out. Mrs Fryth-Willyams, for instance—one of the best of Churchwomen, a Lady Bountiful to Nuneholm, if ever there was one—is highly incensed with her.'

'But why—I've heard nothing of this.'

'Ah, my dear Bente!' the Rector, his wife not being present, did not repress the little pleasantry that had taken wings in his wit. 'How little do we men know of the doings of womenkind?'

'I certainly think these ladies must be mistaken,'

Gervase asserted. 'I don't believe Ellen knows any of them well enough for difficulties to have arisen. She has had friends and invitations, a number. As for Mrs Fryth-Willyams——'

'She was highly offended, my wife assures me, at something—I don't know what—that Mrs Bente said at the garden-party.'

'Then I'm sorry,' Gervase could only protest. 'I can say, or do, no more than that, for I know nothing about it.' He remembered his recent encounter with the lady of the pickled countenance and had misgivings.

'There we are!' cried the Rector, who had again taken a glance at his notes. 'That brings us to the point. Let me express it briefly. You say you can do no more. But, my dear Bente, you must do it. It is essential that whatever Mrs Bente does—however little she helps us—she must refrain from hurting the feelings of our people in the parish. She must be quiescent; if not actually sympathetic, do you see?'

Gervase waited a moment before replying. He frowned at the floor in thought.

'I am afraid I cannot promise anything,' he said reluctantly at last.

'Why not? Do you not see the need?'

'I do, I do. Indeed, I do. I see it with terrible clearness: but——' he hesitated. 'You must allow me time to think things over,' he said.

'But why not settle it now? Come, my dear fellow, it ought to be easy.'

Protesting at the Rector's untimely insistence Gervase flamed.

'I'm entitled to some consideration,' he declared. 'My wife and I are treated as if we had no personal rights whatever.'

'No, no!'

'You have no right—no right whatever'—he emphasised as he looked Dr Deane fairly in the face—'to put these alternatives in this summary manner. My wife may have been—well, incautious; but are you to judge her without a word of defence: and am I to decide our future action on the spur of the moment at your dictation? I must think. I *will* consider the facts before I say anything more.'

The Rector rose protesting. His large hands were spread out helplessly. He was at a loss to know what to say, what to do: the half-sheet of notepaper had no use in this contingency.

Gervase had also risen. His thoughts and emotions were whirling. He walked to the door, and with a bow went out into the hall. Mrs Deane happened to be there. She looked at him with pursed lips and eyes at their sharpest.

'I should like to know what *is* the secret of your wife's past!' she said; and with the hurling of that poisoned bomb opened the door of her husband's room and went in.

CHAPTER XXII

THE unsatisfactory interview at an end, Gervase went straight to the church. Anyhow peace was there to be found.

For the first time he brought comfort to his conscience, which had been heavy because of the established clerical negligence of Nuneholm, by leaving the West-door open and saying aloud Mattins as if there were a congregation present. This became his daily practice. He could not publicly announce the fact, as the Rector had positively forbidden what he called 'unnecessary services': but the principal door was open wide in case any one cared or chanced to go in. Nobody did go in.

It was, in spite of the lack of people, not an empty church to Gervase. It became a full church to him. He had the mystic's temperament, and in these days of trouble the faculty for religious idealism grew within him. So that he was able to fill with gracious spirits the empty benches; and when with worshipful heart he offered his spoken prayers and the praise of psalms, he knew and was convinced that a chorus of immortals was swelling behind him, leaping upward even unto the Ultimate.

He was forced by circumstances into an hermitage of solitude. Poppy and the Rector, in their several ways, were the true, though unconscious, causes of this new increase of mysticism, which promised to become fanaticism, and even a form of intolerance. The tendency was yet but imperceptible; but there it was, actual, and of continuous and rapid growth. Even within the week remaining, before they must leave Cantuar Villa, he was an austerer person. The former natural sweetness of his disposition was charged with stiffening. His heart was harder against human weakness. He was beginning to see evil, not as an excrescence to be removed, leaving its possessor as hale as if it had never been: but as a force of active, positive danger: a sentient, determined, watchful and cunning enemy, essentially incapable of alteration, and yet to be faced and fought. He realised now, rightly or wrongly, that Robert Browning's over-quoted optimism was of the nature of a begged question, and that All's *not* right with the world. He discovered there was ineradicable rot at the heart of the rightness; and that, with all the efforts made and the hope and promise with which humanity is buoyed, there could never be such a triumph as an earthly millennium. Mankind is inherently bad as well as inherently good: and to cure it of evil means the surgeon's remedy, the knife for medicine.

A far distance had Gervase wandered from his earlier condition of rose-coloured confidence. The many combined causes that had brought the canker to his

ideals had done their work completely. He had taken a long step towards an extreme, a step which would probably never have been taken had Poppy been other than she was, and the church at Nuneholm, as represented by the Rector, his worldly wife and the generality of its parishioners, nearer to what should have been. The very innocence of his former hopes and dreams served to make Gervase the more despondent now. He brooded as well as prayed, and at moments mentally stormed over the wilful naughtiness of a too-difficult world.

It certainly was difficult. As day followed day during that last week with the Carpenters, he realised the difficulties abounding. He was like a man thrown naked into the midst of a pathless thicket of impenetrable thorns. Wherever he turned there seemed no way out. His life was full of discords and bitterness.

His relations with Poppy were unchanged. They met only at meals and sometimes not then. Hardly a word passed between them. She was insolent and chilling. She came and went without any regard for him: and to a man as capable of loving-kindness as he, this state of affairs was intolerable. But he kept in mind her need; and did not let her see how deeply she was hurting him, though she was not unaware of his pain and was pleased and encouraged by it.

Of Temble he saw nothing. He neither avoided the sidesman nor sought him out; but remembered the detail of his insult. In fact, their ways did not meet until the following Sunday morning, when Mr

Temble, with the churchwardens and his brother sidesmen, brought the alms-bags to the chancel-rails for Gervase to receive them. Even in those circumstances the curate could not avoid knowing a fierce throb of hate—it was a horrid revelation of his powers of detestation—but he kept his attention to the duty of the moment, and did not see the all-but-hidden smiling contempt in the man's expression.

On the following day they left Cantuar Villas and the Carpenters. Poppy, who had packed her things anyhow, and left Gervase to see to his, wore an air of defiant resignation.

They drove to The Willows in a station-fly, Poppy hardly saying a word. She remained loftily distant. Gervase was anxious that her airs of ungracious detachment should be lost before they reached his aunt's house: and twice made a tentative remark about nothing in particular, hoping to break the ice. The first she passed with a formal, unhelpful answer: the second she ignored. The prospects could not be worse.

They were actually at the gates of The Willows before he spoke to her again. Then he made his appeal.

'Ellen! Let us be friends. Don't let Aunt Grace feel that we are anything else. She'll be awfully kind if you let her.'

Ellen made no reply. Her lip curled slightly.

Miss Bente came to the door to meet them. There was nothing but open kindness in her welcome. She went at once to Poppy prepared to greet her warmly.

'My dear, I'll try and help you to be happy,' she said.

The graciousness of this speech should have softened anybody with the least warmth of heart. No doubt, at times, Poppy could seem warm-hearted enough, so that people unacquainted with her might be captivated, as often was so at first; but this was no such charming moment, and Miss Bente was far from being forgiven. *She* ne'er pardons who has done the wrong. Poppy remembered their last meeting in Mrs Carpenter's front garden, when she had given the cut direct; and seemed by her present manner to suggest that this offer of hospitality was rather a rudeness than anything else.

Making the most of her smallness of stature by holding her body rigid and her nose slightly more in the air than usual, she answered 'Thank you; but please, Miss Bente, don't imagine I'm glad to be here.'

The answer caused tears to flood the eyes of Aunt Grace, though she restrained their flow; and Gervase turning angrily said sharply, 'Behave yourself, Ellen!'

It was an unfortunate opening to the new chapter; and certainly no augury of happiness. Poppy did not answer him; but said in her airy manner to Miss Bente, 'Where is my room?' as though the world were her chambermaid.

'Nickols,' Gervase called to the girl who was carrying some trappings upstairs, 'will you please show Mrs Bente her room?'

'No, Gervase, I will,' said his aunt.

'After that——' he said softly.

'It will be all right,' she replied at once, 'will you come with me, Ellen?'

Ellen followed mutely. She had certainly not scored in that unnecessary first encounter; and, perhaps because of it, forebore from making any belated sign of graciousness.

Her room was small, but comfortable. It overlooked the garden, and faced some distant hills, so that her lot was sufficiently pleasant. Miss Bente had taken care to ensure the comfort of this guest, for the very reason that her old experiences of that difficult lady had been so brutal.

Having Ellen under her roof, in the intimate associations of home life, was a difficult ordeal and in truth repugnant to her; but for Gervase's sake she had ventured even that. The immediate response was bitter, but not unexpected. Grace Bente's heart was still wounded through the cruelty of weeks ago; and this new mishap did not make things really worse; but she was of a kind and loyal nature and did not disdain the helpful practice of heaping coals of fire on the offender's head.

When Miss Bente had seen that Poppy was properly established in her room she came away, shutting the door after her. No sooner outside than she remembered she had not told her the time they dined. She stopped to say, 'At half-past seven—that's in half an hour,' when she heard the key turned in the lock of the door. That was all the answer.

Gervase met her at the foot of the stairs.

'I'm awfully sorry, Aunt Grace; it's beastly, beastly!'

'Never mind, my dear. She's over-wrought,' and

then, unable longer to control her feelings she leaned against his shoulder and drifted to tears. That moved him as nothing else had done. He felt as if, through bringing his wife into the home of this dear woman, he had struck her in the face, and on the heart.

'Oh, can you forgive me?' he said.

'You—you need no forgiveness. Oh, Gervase, Gervase, why did you?—she will break your heart!'

'Can you forgive me?' he earnestly repeated, 'for bringing her here? I ought to have known; yet it was so very difficult and I hoped and hoped.'

She determinately recovered her self-possession and went into her sitting room: he followed her. He was eager at last to speak. The griefs and disappointments of those months of marriage had rushed to this climax of proved futility and pain.

'Aunt Grace!' he said.

'What is it, my dear?' Her voice was very gentle.

The old call of love came to him in the old way. Since he had been a man he had put away his boyish practice of carrying his troubles to her; since he had been a clergyman he had affected a superiority—the privilege of his Cloth—which he was quite incapable of maintaining. At this moment of shock and anguish, he was a boy again. He went to her, knelt beside her, his face in her lap. She put a hand on his head and smoothed his hair.

'Poor darling, my poor boy!'

'Aunt Grace!' he found his voice at last, 'whatever I have got I deserve; I was a fool, a fool—I hoped and

prayed that I might save and redeem Ellen. I felt it was my duty——'

'I know.'

'I would have died for her: this is no boast or lie; but the truth, the absolute truth,' he averred passionately, '—and now——'

'Be patient, Gervase. We may hope—always we may hope.' Her voice broke as she realised the empty comfort she was giving him. She knew he had been patient, that he had done all that mortal man can do for erring and wilful woman: and it was all for nothing, for worse than nothing; for out of his act of chivalry and virtue had come an abiding curse.

'Dear boy. You have your religion. That is the source of the only true comfort for you as for all of us.'

Religion! He raised his head and looked at her: there was a fevered light and anguish in his eyes. He looked like a stricken man. She read there something of the truth, though not until now had she realised how bitter it was.

'My poor Gervase!' she said, and kissed his forehead. She felt instinctively that only in such caressing words and deeds could comfort reach him. . . . So religion had failed him too: but that was not truly so, for the mockeries of Nuneholm with its cold formalities and organised evil snobbishness, its backbiting and slanders, its active denial of charity, its tolerance of the deadly sins provided they did not openly shock a tyrannous respectability, were as far removed from true religion as is north from south, fire from water, hate from love.

He roused himself; he mentally shook himself; he put on again the armour of manhood.

'I'll be no weakling,' he said, and he stood up before her, 'though I have been pitifully weak. I'm no moral giant.'

'And what now?' His aunt, with the tact that was no small part of her charm, brought him to realities. They had to be faced, that was a certainty; and now was the best time, the kindest opportunity. He had her sympathy, he could speak to her frankly, concealing nothing; and that was half the battle.

'That is my job; that's the problem I've got to solve,' he confessed: the mere realisation of the difficulty before him was helpful. It nerved him; added decision to his uncertainty.

'I cannot stay at Nuneholm, that is clear. I must try for a curacy in London. Nuneholm stifles me. I'm no use here. The Rector and I—we could never get on: and his wife, she is always interfering. I must go to London for Ellen's sake. After all, she is a cockney in all her tastes, and after town the country seems monotonous. If only she could have taken an interest in the work here . . . but I'm hardly allowed to do that, and therefore, she . . . I must get a curacy at Hampstead, or Kensington, or in the suburbs; or perhaps I could get back to the East End and fix up lodgings in some nice place where Ellen can see shops and lights. I remember her saying it was lights she wanted to see. Fancy street lamps giving comfort! But I cannot stay at Nuneholm. I did not think I could ever be so futile

as I am proving here. The people are all so strange. I've had some horrid encounters. I was cut dead last week——'

'Oh! by whom?'

'Mrs Fryth-Willyams. Mrs Deane says she has a grievance against Ellen; but why she should cut me dead is beyond me. Then one of the sidesmen was rude not long ago, odiously offensive——'

'And who was that?'

'A Mr Temble.'

'I know him. He's a bad man,' said Aunt Grace decisively.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Oh, my dear, I can't define all that I feel: and my opinion of Mr Temble is largely instinctive; but I'm as certain as I am of anything—which is not saying much—that he is a man of bad passions and not exalted life. And he was very rude to you?'

'He was.'

'In what way?'

He shook his head after a moment of thought.

'No, let me forget it. It was too small. But I suppose it was somehow Ellen again.'

'How could it be Ellen in his case? But there—it seems to be always Ellen. Dearest Gervase, let me be frank with you, you'll have to separate from her. I'm sure of it now. She is your enemy. She'll ruin you.'

He got up and walked up and down the room, his forehead clouded with perplexity. He stopped at last

and looked with brooding eyes at the autumn fire crackling in the fireplace.

'Anything may happen!' he confessed. 'I know she is not my friend. I am sure that she sometimes hates me; but I'm bound to her in a way no other man could be bound. I dedicated my life, my everything to her. I did it deliberately, gladly; I made no conditions with myself. I only accepted the whole heavy task gladly, as my small instalment of spiritual goodness in this passing opportunity of life. Even if she breaks me, kills me, I'll keep my part of the bargain.'

Aunt Grace rose and went to him, put a hand on his shoulder, and looked into his eyes.

'If I saw the least gleam of hope for you and her I'd say go on: but, dearest, I don't: and meanwhile, giving yourself altogether for her you lose the chance of doing good to others.'

He frowned in thought for a moment; his eyes were dark with a far-away expression.

'There are heaps of people giving themselves for others; but Ellen is alone. There is nobody caring for her, nobody but me. Without me she may be lost entirely.'

'And with you she may be lost entirely. My dear, you are breaking your heart and ruining your life for what will prove to be nothing—absolutely nothing.'

'Still I must go on. If I gave her up, and she was lost for ever, I should feel it was because I had failed her in her need.'

'But she has failed you. She had obligations to you, remember, as much as you had obligations to her.'

Miss Bente drew his head to her, and kissed him on the cheek.

'No, she has obligations, of course—because she also made the promise of the marriage service when I did —but my obligation goes back to an earlier time, to an almost holier time if that be possible, when she came to me in her need and I swore to God with all the solemnity of a Christian oath that I would do everything I could: everything, even to death itself—in order to save her.'

'And if she refused to be saved?'

'Then still I would try and try. I would never give her up. I would go on trying for seventy times seventy times seven. Even if I was released from my oath I could not and would not give her up; because even in her worst—in her worst wilfulness—she still would need me, and with the weakest and most obstinate of sinners there is always hope.'

He paused and turned away. She removed her hand from his shoulder and went back to her chair.

'And now I've got to find another curacy, somewhere where I can work and Ellen won't be starved of those delights which are her necessity. It will be a joy to get away from the Tembles and the Fryth-Willyams and the others—for I'm sure they are not alone in this blighted Nuneholm. I haven't been treated with open rudeness by any one else; but too many people look at me with judging eyes.'

'That must be your imagination, Gervase.'

'I'm afraid not. I wish it was.'

'You are too sensitive, my dear.'

'I dare say! Perhaps it is so: but somehow one can tell, and I don't feel I'm mistaken. There is an atmosphere of suspicion about. There are only a few houses now where I feel I'm welcomed as a priest whose life and words are helpful. The rest seem to regard me as—oh, a bruised reed. I'm losing strength, I sometimes feel I'm losing faith and losing everything, in this horrible suspense and suspicion.' He spoke these words with passion.

Miss Bente saw it was futile to speak further. She had ample sympathy for him in his overwhelming difficulties; but the need was greater and deeper than even her loving sympathy could satisfy.

'You had better have a talk with Doctor Deane, and tell him everything. He is your Rector, and even he——'

'My dear Aunt Grace!' Gervase's tone was decidedly impatient. 'The Rector is a hopeless, useless fool; the mere puppet of his worldly wife. He'd give me curiosity and platitudes—words and words. He is —but these judgments don't help. No, aunt, there is nobody to help, but you—and Christ——'

'Without mentioning me, that seems sufficient,' she said.

'That ought to be,' he acknowledged, 'but now——'

'But now?' she helped him by repeating the words as he had come to a pause.

'I feel lost, all lost—like a weakling in a mist, in a forest full of difficulties. I seem to have lost bearings. It can't be that I have lost faith. I haven't lost faith,' he said sternly as if to convince himself, 'I certainly haven't lost faith; religion and the true Church seem more essential and true than ever; but oh, it is difficult, so difficult.'

He looked at her; for long she remembered the pain and eloquent silent pleading of his eyes, and then he went hurriedly to his room. She knew why he had gone; she knew that somewhere silently he would be praying for the strength to support himself in the toils and burdens that had grown so heavy, praying for that wilful and wicked creature whose influence in his life was sinister with the promise of doom.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE next morning Poppy was good as gold; but she went out before noon and without a word of warning did not return till eleven at night. This sent Miss Bente and Gervase to the deepest circle of the limbo of anxiety. While waiting for her they consulted together as to what should be done. There must be a basis of understanding to go upon.

On the following day Miss Bente spoke to Ellen, and begged her to give some notice of her intentions if they involved alterations in the economy of the household.

'I'll try to,' promised Poppy, and that was all.

The world was frozen again between her and Gervase. Neither spoke to the other now, although he was almost beyond all things anxious to re-establish a state of workable harmony. But until she made a move it was impossible for him to do anything. His approaches had invariably been unwelcome and an occasion for further difficulties. His disillusionment had travelled weary leagues. He looked back almost with eyes of wistful wonder at the gay camaraderie of their honeymoon. Often in his moments of meditation, he thought of that roseate page in his gray-black marriage story,

and marvelled at the charm of his wife then, and the destructive sequel now.

It was with a heavy heart that he went about his duties. He had lost confidence and grown still more susceptible to the rudeness which seemed to his suspicious sensitiveness of more frequent offering. He had no further positive insult to endure; but there was a manifest slack in the ties which bound him to the parish.

Distant glimpses of the Rector's wife one day, and of Temble the next, reminded him of the disfavour he suffered at opposite poles. It was, however, not the open enmity of these people he objected to—though he still writhed at the recollection of Temble's inexcusable behaviour, and at times lusted to strike him; it was the sustained consciousness that all these people were regarding him with a veiled antagonism, that not merely had he missed their confidence but had earned their doubt and dislike; that was what troubled him.

Much of this was imaginary, no doubt—most of the torture of a sensitive soul is wantonly self-administered—but there was no gainsaying the want of cordiality of those who were not, as Temble and Mrs Deane were, his open enemies; and that certainly was enough to bring the touch of heart-break into his endeavours. There was unquestionably talk going about, of which he was the butt. There could be no doubt of that, though he had practically no tangible evidence on which to base his certainty.

On the top of his temperamental distrust came Poppy's worse behaviour. She had not kept her passive

promise to Miss Bente to 'try to' be considerate in their domestic associations. She came and went, without regard or notice to others. Where she went to was perhaps no concern of theirs; but they gathered from things she said that twice in that first week it was to London.

Gervase thought of expostulating with her even once more; but his aunt protested at the futility of his doing so, and he could not but see that at present it would be of no avail. With such as she, protests, appeals, rebukes were merely incentives to further rebellion. They could only wait, they could only hope; and, waiting, could only realise the hopelessness of it all. Poppy was beyond redemption. Both Gervase and his aunt now saw the inevitableness of a final crash, unless—the Ethiop could be induced to change his skin.

Never for a moment did Miss Bente flinch from her share in the ordeal, by her uninvited, that was rapidly growing intolerable; but Gervase saw that the time for a break had come. Patience was no longer of avail. He must use desperate means. He must compel Ellen to realise her actual helplessness, to force her to face the realities. The past and the present had taught her nothing. She was asking for the best of both possible worlds, and deserving nothing of either. She had by her deeds refused to make any compromise, any concession, any bridge of mutual understanding. She had gone her own wilful way, not caring a farthing for anybody or anything else. It was time for a climax. Her licence and folly must come to an end.

Gervase walked again upon the hills; and, now that a decision was essential, made up his mind.

The clergyman had turned. He would now put on fists. Because he believed it was the lesson to learn from his Master, he had hitherto suffered the buffetings and the spittings and the insults. He had not actively resented the persecution, of fact and of fancy, to which he had been subjected for the same sufficient, unreasonable reason: but now the end had come. His manhood broke the chains and bars of the cage within which the old ideals had imprisoned him. Peace was no longer possible; inaction had now become shame and the certain promise of further humiliation.

He gave expression to the anger that had been slowly accumulating within him—a quickened force of passionate fire; and, in the silence of the hills, vowed he would strike back, as his Master had done when he whipped the money-changers from the Temple. Here, he told himself, was the same old evil raising its head again—Mammon displacing the saints and the angels. The Rector of Nuneholm and his associates were buying and selling the tinsel-ware of the world, much in the same way as the ecclesiastical authorities of Jerusalem had done. He would whip them now. If they had served God rightly, perhaps Ellen might still have been saved.

The fond fool nursed the delusion with a pitiful obstinacy.

The mental strife—it amounted to that—on the hills had calmed him, and made clear his intentions. He

returned to The Willows feeling cheerful. Decision is always a tonic, however wrong or right its effect may be; and Gervase felt joyously stronger because he had decided what to do. He felt in truth a strong man with a task before him that would be direct and not difficult. There was nothing vengeful in his intentions, but he certainly rejoiced at the prospect of telling those people the truth.

That should be his first business. Ellen's should follow.

He told his aunt he had decided to make a break, and that no matter what it might cost to go elsewhere, he could no longer inflict himself and his wife upon The Willows.

She was very heartily relieved at the promise of being rid of Poppy; and realised that for him too, so long as he had the incubus on his shoulders, it would be better to go. The earlier he faced the inevitable the better. Ellen would certainly continue to bring him unhappiness; and it would be necessary for Gervase to come to some definite basis of relationship with her. Peace could only come after struggle. There must be a break; that was as inevitable as to-morrow's dawn; better far, then, that it should come soon, come summarily, come at once, and so diminish the intervening anguish and more speedily bring peace.

Gervase did not tell his aunt of his plans. She had no idea of the extremity of his bitter feelings against the so-called Church-people of Nuneholm.

Time drifted to Sunday. It was Gervase Bente's

function that morning to officiate at the early Communion service, it being celebrated at eight o'clock on the first Sunday of every month. This duty almost invariably worked him up to a condition of ecstasy. It roused his spirituality, inspired his religious emotions, quickened the mystical illumination that had always been, and now was more than ever, a vivid part of his personality.

He did not on this occasion go home to breakfast; but stayed in the church, fasting until the time of the morning-service, spending some time in the vestry, but for a long while kneeling at the fringe of the altar. He felt that he needed all the spiritual strength he could attain for the task before him; and he prayed and prayed, with the earnestness of despair, for the inspiration and courage needed to carry him through the task awaiting him.

He was almost swooning by the time the verger arrived to ring the bell at the opening of the doors; so he sat in an arm-chair in the vestry, read *The Dream of Gerontius*, and rested, storing every atom of his nervous energy and resources with a miserly care.

But all the time he was reading his mind was badgered and oppressed by thoughts of poor Ellen and the worldling hypocrites of Nuneholm. It was 'poor Ellen' in this hour of quiescence, 'poor Ellen' who, in a way, was the victim of these shallow, material people.

When the Rector entered the clergy-room to robe himself, he noticed the pallor and quiet of his curate;

and, therefore, refrained from his usual boisterous greeting.

It was not only sympathy that kept him quiet, though it was partly that; but also the thought that Bente might be feeling ashamed of himself, for the Rector was now convinced—as his wife had been and had induced him to be—that Gervase was eccentric: an adjective which covers a deal and is often highly useful to the commonplace in authority.

Gervase roused himself when the Rector was ready, and followed him silently into the choir-room to say the preliminary prayer and collect before the procession into the church. He took his part in the service almost, it seemed, phlegmatically. He appeared to be heavy and listless: as though suffering reaction after some great stress, as was the case.

'He takes drugs,' said Mrs Dunstan Deane to herself.

At last the time came for the sermon, and Gervase hurried eagerly to the pulpit. As his glance ranged over the well-dressed, not over-crowded congregation —and this Sunday morning service was the best-attended of the day—his heart grew heavy. The earlier exultation was now gone. He hated the necessity of his bitter task. He could see Temble smirking. That helped him.

He gave out his text. The congregation settled to listen with that easy inattention which so often makes the half-hour of sermon-time a period of grateful rest.

'*The latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose.*'

Gervase Bente, though in ordinary times no extraordinary preacher, was destined to preach in Nuneholm a sermon powerful enough to establish his reputation there. It will not be forgotten by those who heard it —though few of them will talk about it. It struck, hit, burnt, pierced: went home, angered, rankled: it did all the things the ordinary sermon is not expected or invited to do.

But Gervase when he returned to his place in the chancel was disappointed. He thought he had failed. The words had required flogging to get them out; so he believed. He had lacked energy and heat; so he told himself. . . . Then he remembered seeing Mrs Fryth-Willyams stalk out. Something on her hat had bobbed about absurdly, and he remembered that once there had been even a buzz of comment, hurting the still silence. He had also been aware of Temble's continuous smirking.

Perhaps the most helpful, and, therefore, the best account of the effort and its effect was provided by Mr George Sprunt, the basso-soloist, whose spirituous adventures, it may be remembered, had helped to destroy the parish cricket-club, one of the earliest of Gervase Bente's social-missionary efforts.

Thus did Mr Sprunt discourse to the wife of his large heart, and to that wife's sister, Flossie, over their midday joint.

'The liveliest morning I've had since I've been with old Platitude (so do choirmen sometimes speak of their rectors!) Gravy (probably a humorous rendering

of Gervase) went up in the pulpit, looking like a man who'd sat up all night with a nagging wife—oh, I know what it's like'—this in open jocular aside to his sister-in-law.

'Do get on, George; you're not funny,' said Mrs Sprunt.

'Well, to cut a long story short, he gave it to them; straight from the shoulder; my word! I didn't catch the text: didn't intend to listen; but Boozy (joy-name of the tenor-soloist) said it was something about a bootlace. But that doesn't matter a bit:—and this beer's flat—which does matter. Some one's been messing about with the cask. You keep an eye on Eliza!'

There was an interval, while Eliza, who was Mrs Sprunt's maid-of-all-work, poor tyrannised underdog! entered, was argued with, protested feebly, and in her commingled indignation and confusion did hazardous things with plates.

'Well, George, about Mr Bente?' Mrs Sprunt reminded him after she had still further depressed Eliza.

'Yes. I knew jolly soon that what he was talking was hitting the mark. I knew because all the choir was listening; even the boys knew something was up. I've never known the church so silent: you could have heard the pin (referring to the pin of the proverb). He began with old Platitude and then went on to the Gimlet. Didn't mention names, of course; but they were who he was booting—as plain as if they'd been placards.'

'Yes, yes; but what exactly did he say?'

'Well, I'll try.' He thought a moment, collecting his thoughts for an extra-special intellectual effort. 'But it isn't easy.'

'How did he go for them?'

Thereupon George Sprunt did his best and gave an account from which his two auditors understood that the eloquent curate described the need of the world to get back to the early ideals. He asked his hearers to imagine Peter or Paul or any of the Fathers coming to the parish. What would they think of the sort of faith that was preached from that pulpit, and what sort of faith was it that they lived in their lives? The only faith worth living for was worth dying for; would they die for the sort of faith their lives represented?

'Quite right too!' agreed Mrs Sprunt vehemently, who never went to church but prided herself on the steadfastness of her religion.

'I thought old Fright-Willyams was going to have a fit. She turned positively purple as he spoke of the worldliness, snobbishness and meanness of those who fancied they were leaders in the life of the place. What good would it be to them when they were facing death, to know that they had carriage-horses, and, therefore, thought themselves better than the working poor, who walked. Then he talked of the Garden of Gethsemane; and I saw a gleam come into the Fryth-Willyams' eye. She was in the front seat; it was plain as a pikestaff.'

'Why? What's Mrs Fryth-Willyams—can't bear

the stuck-up old stupid—what had she to mind about that?'

'It wasn't so clear to me: but he talked about social fripperies. I know that was the word at any rate: and wondered when people went into gardens, whether they thought of the Agony, or whether they weren't thinking of mean questions of precedence and mere worldly belongings. I suppose he was referring to Mrs F.-W.'s annual summer splash; and, by George, this year there was a splash. I remember the rain came down like billy-o!'

'Did you and Anna go to it, George? I heard the band two years ago,' asked Flossie.

'Lor, no. That's only for the pots, the big-bugs of The Height.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Sprunt wisely. 'I expect that's it. Mr Bente wasn't invited.'

'Perhaps. It'd take some cheek to ask his Missis, at any rate. Talk of mustard and cayenne!'

'Don't be vulgar, George.'

'I mean the sermon, stoopid: though she—well! I'll bet my bottom-dollar Temble knows how she likes to be kissed.'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, George, for thinking such thoughts about a clergyman's wife.' Mrs Sprunt rebuked her husband. 'You remember, Flossie,' she continued to her sister, 'I showed her to you; a little woman with a pale face, and a pointed nose, and a dress that was just a little—you know—saucy for a parson's wife, we thought.'

Flossie indicated that she remembered well.

'Well, about the sermon, George? Was that all?'

'My word, no! but we'd better let Eliza clear away these plates first.'

A further interval of Eliza, while Sprunt refreshed his inner energies.

'That is better!' he said, when the session was resumed. 'Yes, the sermon. He went on about the meanness of all this display, and the cowardice. They could dress themselves, and indulge themselves, and put on airs, and pull society faces, and all that—oh, he went for them no end. The Gimlet was quaking with fury. Boozy nudged me to look at her; but I was looking already. She was a picture-palace all by herself. Her eyes were like black holes. Old Platitude pretended to be asleep. He sat back, like this,'—the speaker illustrated—'all of a heap; but he was taking in every word—every blessed word of it, you may bet your water-can. He's as artful as they make 'em.'

'And——?'

'Oh, yes; and then he brought in the text, and hit 'em hard. I tell you. If Jesus Christ came to them, would they be worthy to undo His shoes—what's the phrase?'

'To unloose the latchet of His shoe. Something like that.'

'That's it, Flossie. I cannot quote texts, never could: it comes of having to learn collects when I was a kid. My father would make us, while he sat —absorbing. That reminds me.'

'Get on with the sermon, George.'

'Right-o! Well, he said they would shrink with shame, would know themselves worthless servants, the poorest of the poor, in the presence of the Son of God. And then he got excited. He banged the cushion, and stood up straight, like the picture of a prophet. Believe me, every eye in the church was upon him. He talked about the Pharisees: called 'em whited sepulchres and hypocrites. Said they'd as much chance of heaven as a blue-bottle fly.'

'Oh, he didn't, George!' protested Mrs Sprunt.

'No, my dear, he didn't exactly put it like that; that was my bit of poetry. But he basted and blasted 'em all right. You take my word for it. It was a treat. Half the old women in the front seats were fainting, and half the men were swearing or trying to look as if it wasn't them. It was eloquence; eloquence, by Jove, it was. I didn't think Gravy had it in him.'

'And that was all?'

'Practically all. When he'd finished, left 'em limp, so to speak, he gave them one look round, as though to watch the effect, and stepped down, going back to his seat, as if it was just an ordinary morning-sermon, and now, if you please, let us have the offertory! Just like that. And he was smiling all the time.'

'I suppose it means he must go.'

'You bet it does!' Mr Sprunt assured his lady. 'Old Platitude can't afford that sort of thing; but it did us good while it lasted. Mrs Fright-W. won't forget it in a hurry, for one. She looked as if she could

have bit him, and then she got up and went. Let's go into the drawing-room. I want a pipe. I shan't forget that sermon in a hurry—no, not so long as I live.'

Sprunt was right in his conclusion. Gervase Bente had to go.

As soon as the service was over, and he, followed by the Rector, was back in the clergy-room, the reverend doctor said to him, with unrestrained anger and indignation.

'Bente, you must be mad.'

That was all. It was sufficient.

Early in the afternoon a messenger came 'haste post-haste' to The Willows, bearing a note of ultimatum, formally severing Gervase's connection with the parish, and forbidding him to appear in the church again.

'Good!' said he. 'And now that's settled—now for fresh woods and pastures new—and now, aha, for Ellen!'

Miss Bente who had heard the sermon, and was in her heart proud of him—that he had not feared to tell the truth—shook a grave head.

'I hope it will be for the best, Gervase.'

'It's the only way,' said he. 'I was becoming a vegetable, a weakling: but now I'm going to be a man, and fight and govern. Ellen needs taking in hand. It is time for me to be master; and I'm going to be master —and, oh dear, oh dear, it's all very horrid!'

CHAPTER XXIV

L'homme propose, la femme dispose!

It was Ellen after all who made the move. For the first time since entering The Willows she went to Gervase in his room: storm and fury were in her eyes. She was in an extremity of rage.

She rushed in without knocking, and found him trying to read a book. Before he could say a word she was eloquent.

'So you've made a fine fool of yourself,' she burst out. 'They've told me all about it—you've got to go.'

He was naturally stirred and rather offended by her onslaught: but he kept calm.

'Who are "they"? Who told you this?'

'Never mind who: but I have friends in Nuneholm, better friends than your precious aunt I can tell you: and I know everything about your mad exhibition this morning. That's an end of you, Mr Hypocrite!'

She stood looking down on him: her eyes were full of fury; they seemed red with flame.

'Don't be absurd, Ellen;' he did not rise but regarded her quietly. 'And you know I'm no hypocrite. What I did I did because——' he hesitated.

'Oh, mumble away, you fool!' she broke in. 'I

don't want to know why you did or what you did. What I want to know is what are you going to do? That's what I've come in here for.'

He still was looking at her calmly. He seemed not a bit perturbed by the bombshell of wrath she had flung at him.

'Sit down,' he commanded, and pointed to the chair by the hearthrug opposite.

'No!' she said: and—thereupon changed her mind and sat.

'We may as well talk now as at any time,' he went on, 'and I may as well explain at once that what I said in the sermon this morning was said for your sake, chiefly for you, remember that!'

'Oh, you can cut that out, Gervase. It's too cheap. I'm sick of all that salvation business. I didn't ask to be saved, did I?—"saved" indeed!—ha!'

'Still you may as well listen and perhaps understand something of the truth. Whether you know it or not, you've been the butt of the vile, mean gossip of this place——'

'That doesn't matter.' She imitated his former indifference: but not successfully. Her eyes still showed her anger. She was very human when it came to the hitting-back.

'This time it does. Gossip generally doesn't matter a rap: but in your case it does: because it has been especially venomous and aimed at you because you are —forgive me for reminding you'—that was a little bitter—'a clergyman's wife.'

Poppy curled her lips. This was rather rich: but there was no humour in her expression or her thoughts.

'You've been the bane of all the church-going worldlings here.'

'The—what people? What do I hear?' There was no softening in her tone; but his words were securing some effect, it seemed.

'The chief people here: you have somehow offended all of them and——'

'Most delighted to hear it!'

'They were determined not to forgive you. The Rector and his wife kept worrying me with remarks and questions about you, because you didn't go to church or work, and all that: people have been openly rude to me——'

'They were rude enough to me, too, the swines.'

'All right!' he said as if to dismiss that aspect of the subject: for this agreement was really not helpful, and he was determined to keep to his purpose. 'So as their censoriousness and inquisitiveness——'

'Long words!'

'—were so very far removed from their religious professions I felt I must tell them the truth: I did it this morning.'

She looked in brooding thought at the restless flames for a moment or two, and he watched her face with curiosity. What was the new move to be; what the next mood? Then she glanced at him, as if waiting for him to go on.

'Well?' she asked, as he did not at once continue the lead.

'I've felt,' he said, 'that if these people had been true Christians, genuine Church people, and not purse-proud, vulgar worldlings, you might have been happier here, might have helped in the parish work and done something——'

She gave a bitter little laugh.

'That, too, you can cut out, Gervase! But it's just as well you think as you do. They are a rotten lot here, and I hate 'em all. I hate the whole pig of a place, and shall be glad——'

'Oh, I'm glad to hear that! You said before—but never mind now.' It suddenly struck him that it would be as well not to say anything unnecessary. But she caught up his words.

'And what I said before is true enough. I do hate the place: but I've got friends here who—are kind to me.'

'May I ask who they are? I think I ought to know.'

'That's just where you're mistaken then. They are my concern, and no business of yours.'

'Pardon me! You may refuse to tell me; but they are my concern and my business.'

'Phew!' Her interjection—half whistle, half word—was at once expressive of insolent defiance and unconquerable obstinacy. Gervase saw there was no thoroughfare down that lane; but felt bound to make a further—almost a formal—protest.

'You must remember, Ellen, that you do fill a responsible position here. You are a clergyman's

wife; and became one knowing what you were doing. You married me with your eyes open——'

She sneered openly; it was too obvious an opportunity.

'With your eyes open,' he repeated the words slowly, for emphasis. 'If marriage to you is not the sacred institution it is to me——'

'Oh, you bore me!' she flashed out. 'What a fool you are, Gervase, and what a fool I was,' this more slowly, 'to have anything to do with you! I thought when I was tying up with you, you were a man, and not a prosy sham. I prefer the old life, that I do. Yes, you may look like a shocked tombstone, but it's true —true, every word of it. I prefer the old life—the streets, the streets, the streets!'

That shocked him.

'We'd better stop this talk. It's worse than useless.' He got up as he said so; but she kept her seat.

'Not till I've done. Now I've something to say. You told me to sit here and talk; and I'm going to.'

'Go on then,' he said, 'let's have it out. It's better we should come to an understanding. Tell me straight out—no keeping back—what is it?'

He stood on the hearthrug, towering, and looked down at her with growing anger. He felt within him a quickening impatience and smouldering embers of hate. His voice was brusque. Something of the spirit of his wrath passed to her, and rekindled the furies that had been raging when she burst into the room.

'You've got to give me a separation allowance, Gervase: and let me go.'

He pondered her words for a minute. The proposition was intolerable. A moment's thought had been enough for him to realise that. It cut against all his ideals and ideas. He belonged to the school which accepted no tampering—however legalised it might be—with the sacrament of marriage. Divorce was to him an intolerable and immoral practice, inconsistent with the principles of Christianity, antagonistic to the direct teaching of his Lord; and the living separately of married couples was the next thing to it. It opened doors to the easiest of sins.

'That I will not do.' He fired out the words as if they were deliberate, solitary shots from a machine-gun. She recognised their finality.

'You will have to. I will make you,' she declared.

He laughed bitterly. That showed how far he had changed from the earlier Gervase Bente. 'Nothing will make me. I will not consent to separate from you, however much it may cost.'

They glared at each other. There could be no question of their absolute separation now, so far as all but the mere legality of marriage was concerned.

'You are a fool, Gervase,' she said. Her face was pale with emotion: her eyes gleamed. She was controlling an almost uncontrollable excitement. 'What good is it to you to keep me, to compel me to remain?'

That roused him. His latent fanaticism was now alive, it marched.

'You are the fool, Ellen; wilful, self-destroying. My God, I have prayed for you, and wept for you! I have offered sacrifices for you, before the altar, that you might be saved!'

She wanted to interrupt him; but the living force of his words kept her silent.

'When I met you in that awful condition by the Docks, in poverty, in shame, I felt for you pity. I saw you, a woman doomed, blighted by that ill-fortune to a life of sordid misery, degradation and an early death. You were too good not to be saved. I don't know what, or how much, to believe of what you told me of your former life, whether you were an officer's daughter, a governess, wronged, and all that; but this I knew and know, that you had refinement, are not like any other of the women who lead that horrible life——'

'I don't want to hear any more,' she broke in. She had recovered her wits, but was still rather stunned by his rapid and passionate words.

'Please!' he implored, or commanded; she was silent at once; listening now, even with eagerness, to what he was saying.

'I recognised that you were naturally a superior woman; but I suppose had lost manners through losing caste. I've heard you swear, use blasphemy . . .' He stopped a moment and then resumed his seat, and leaning forward talked, helping his utterance with a gesticulating hand. There flashed simultaneously into the minds of both the parallel occasion when in Alma Terrace they had talked before he asked her to marry him.

'I was sure you were worth making sacrifice for; so I asked you to marry me. Until then the idea of marriage had been—if I'd thought of it at all—distasteful, contrary to all my wishes. I had no intention of being other than celibate.'

'Pity you changed then,' she said, not insincerely.

'I felt you were worth while—and I believe it still—but I want you to realise that I was making no ordinary—I won't say sacrifice, that would be priggish and wrong—no ordinary plunge, when I decided to ask you to be my wife. I was glad when you accepted, although I was—I may acknowledge it—shy of you and all that marriage meant; and then I was glad when we were married. That fortnight in Paris was the happiest time in my life. You were a dear companion then.'

Her eyes brightened; her lips parted.

'How have things drifted so that——' he paused to consider his words—'that little time ago seems so very long ago?' He did not wait for her to answer. The impossibility of her behaviour, her angers and wilfulness, her cruelty, all occurred to him as reasons cumulative and sufficient to explain the gulf that stretched between them now. 'Well,' he went on, 'I have told you all this that you may realise it was not lightly that I joined hands with you; and that I shan't lightly, I can tell you, break with you.'

'So you won't give me a separate allowance?'

'No.'

'You prefer to keep an unwilling and a disloyal wife?'

He did not shrink from the avowal implied.

'You make things very difficult, Ellen,' he answered sadly.

She gave a gesture of impatience.

'You must know well, Gervase, there's no chance of my making you a proper wife. You oughtn't to have married me; really you oughtn't——'

'But——'

'Oh, don't start that pulpit stuff again. You wronged me when you married me, and yourself.'

'I——'

She checked him with a gesture.

'You ought to have married, but another sort. Oh, you weren't made for celibacy—no man is; though some fools think they are. But I'm not going to waste time talking about that. You've got to give me an allowance; and let me go.'

'No, Ellen, I will not.'

'You'll have to, sooner or later.'

'Never—never!'

'You will! she insisted. 'Don't be such a blind fool. I'm not going to live with you: understand that! If you give me an allowance I may keep straight: if you don't——'

It was too much. Her words, sounding to him in his stress so cynical, so cruel, roused him afresh. He rose abruptly, and almost boomed at her; his voice was loud with wrathful indignation.

'How dare you! How dare you make such a bargain! Do you not realise that your immortal soul is at stake?'

'Immortal fiddlesticks! Don't repeat your morning's

performance to me. No second house to-night, if you please.' She shifted as if she were thinking of going: but made no actual move—her intention was not yet achieved.

'Silence!' He glowered at her, much as in the pulpit that morning he had, all unconsciously, glowered at the puppets of Nuneholm. 'You are too much to me to let you go like that.' The simple words came out.

'Too much to you, what do you mean?'

'Why, Ellen, don't you see?' He faltered for words; he did not quite know how to express the thought that had been nesting in his consciousness. 'It is not only your soul I've been thinking of; it's you—you!'

She looked up at him: he down at her. Their glances met.

'Me—the woman?' she asked.

He nodded in affirmation. 'I cannot let you go.'

She turned to look at the fire and fix her thoughts . . . There was no help for it . . .

The principal need of her emotional life was change. The streets were calling.

'You must let me go,' she said, 'and you'll be mean —more than mean—if you do not help me.'

Her response served to harden him.

'I will never consent to a separation,' he declared, 'Try, try and live with me! I'll give you as much happiness and liberty as I can. I don't want to restrict you, or to lose you. I want you to be happy, Ellen. Oh, why can't we? We will live in London. I shall have my work to do, and you can enjoy the theatres,

the places, the shops'—how far he had gone from his older rigours and aspirations—'but be loyal. I shall forget what you said as to that'—for suddenly he had remembered—'Try to make the new home a real home. We'll have a flat where you'll be mistress. It will give you things to think about; that's what you want.'

She moved impatiently. Protests and pleadings were wasted on this fool.

'I wonder how it would be if we had a child,' he said wistfully.

'Don't be an ass, Gervase,' she snapped. 'I'd take jolly good care that didn't happen.'

'What?' he was shocked.

'Never mind! but look at it from your own standpoint—What sort of a mother should I make? I should hate the brat. No, no; it's no use. I'm no good. I'm impossible. Realise it, Gervase. If you ever wanted or want my love——'

'Dear Heaven!'

'You can only gain it by letting me go. Let me go! Let me go!' she made appeal and stretched out her hands to him. 'Let me go, and give me an allowance; and then—then there's no knowing——'

He walked to the door and back to the table. His mouth was firmly set. The fanaticism that had been growing during the trying Nuneholm months was in full possession of him now.

'I will not let you go,' he said. 'You are my wife. I married you to keep you from that life of the damned.' He rapped with the knuckles of his right hand on the

table as he leaned towards her. 'Whatever you may do, I will not give up the charge I took when we stood before the altar in St Brendan's. So help me, God!'

She sprang from the chair. She could gladly have struck him.

'You fool! You fool! You fool!' she repeated the words with an increasing intensity of passion, as she went swiftly to the door and flung it open. Then she looked back to say, 'I will break you for this.'

The door slammed. She was gone. He continued to stare at the panels which closed her out.

'Poor silly wretch. Poor girl!' he cried aloud in his pity. 'I cannot—I must—I will!'

Then as he realised how she had braved and defied him, as he remembered what she had seemed to confess of disloyalty, he forgot or he found himself. The discipline of years slipped from him: all the culture he had attained, the innate gentleness he had inherited, all went from him—all. He was a passionate, furious man. Jealousy and anger made him in those fleeting moments no better than the creedless pagan whose only gospel was lust for the blood of vengeance. For a little while he lost his self-control. He was burning with bitter hatred, against her, against all who had made those Nuneholm months so futile, hurtful, evil. But beyond all others he hated Poppy. In those brief, mad moments he could have killed her.

He realised this truth: then the realisation brought reason again and flooding shame.

CHAPTER XXV

THE grass did not grow under Gervase Bente's feet during the next few days. Almost before Poppy was aware of it, she was wafted away—the station fly did the first of the wafting—to Notting Hill Gate, and within a week found herself installed with Gervase in the furnished flat of a man who had been suddenly called to India.

Gervase Bente's determination to rule with a firm hand had seemingly been successful. Poppy had protested and procrastinated; she had been icily contemptuous and warmly gracious: she had flattered Miss Bente and snubbed Miss Bente: she had within the few hours of a few days been herself in every one of her many moods: but it was all the same to Gervase. He had made up his mind definitely, and had done what he determined to do with a new inflexibility.

Poppy was beaten in this round of the game. She could—and she did—try her arts and her objections: but they were quietly, finally, firmly over-ruled. Gervase had his way without any abatement; and at last with unquestionable relief to Aunt Grace, that trying young woman, her niece-in-law, was successfully wafted away.

'And what do you propose to do? Moon about and feel a perfect saint, I suppose?' Poppy asked her husband when she found that Go was the only word.

He laughed mirthlessly. His laughter bore the note of mastership to her sensitive ears; and, as she realised her present impotence, it made her for a little while furious.

'Oh no. I'm going back to St Brendan's. Tom Richards is glad to have me as a sort of part-time curate.'

'At next to nothing a year, I suppose?'

'I'm glad to go at any price,' he answered.

'The more fool you!'

As soon as Poppy was established in the flat she was happy as a princess—for a time. Novelty rang its changes in her willing ears, and she exulted for a few weeks in theatres, picture-palaces, shops . . . Gervase was privileged to have elastic hours at St Brendan's —sometimes he was very late, sometimes he was early: at some seasons of the year, as Lent and Advent, he would be hardly at home at all: but just now he was able to spend a good deal of time at Notting Hill Gate. He tried to interest Poppy in books: but she would have nothing to do with those he recommended, although they were, as he said, of the literary salt of the earth.

The trouble was, as Gervase soon found out, that his wife had no helpful companions and no occupation for her hours. She would not make the right sort of friends, and could not interest herself in feminine acquaintances. The relaxation that most women enjoy in visiting and working, in the talk of tea-time at calls and at homes, was not for her. She openly derided

the tabbies and cockatoos, as she named them. Moreover, she would not take any interest in the management of their home.

Gervase, with his ever amazing optimism, had hoped she would be mistress of their establishment, making things meet; but in no respect would she gratify his hopes. She would not even have a maid to superintend. A charwoman came every morning early, to clean the rooms, attend to things, and prepare the breakfast. Lunch and dinner, when they were at home, came from a restaurant close by.

It was not the ideal arrangement.

Gervase bicycling home every afternoon or evening from the exacting East End, with nerves racked and powers strained by the blessed but strenuous work, soon began to dread the daily new ordeal. There was so little of home about his home; and in this buzzing London there was a greater loneliness. He began to feel such disinclination to return to his barren hearth as he had known at Nuneholm: but he overcame the feeling, and allowed Ellen to have no inkling of the deep and increasing disappointment, approaching to despair, occasioned by her silent obstinacy and hidden resolute determination not to co-operate in any way with him. Her policy seemed to be, Here am I against my will: do with me as you can . . .

The strain of his work at St Brendan's, difficult enough under favourable conditions, was increased by the anxieties at home. He was necessarily an imperfect helper to Mr Richards, who, an over-worker

himself, wanted all the time of his men and—just a little more. To have as curate one whose mind was obviously divided between his present pressing duties and worry elsewhere, was not very serviceable to the parish; but even so the Vicar was glad to have him, and Arthur Jerome rejoiced even more.

But they recognised that Gervase was changed: he had even—so the Vicar of St Brendan's, after a fortnight, mournfully declared—deteriorated. The old spirit, the fire that had been lighted as at some Franciscan lamp, was diminished if not gone. It shone intermittently, sometimes brightly as ever; but generally the flame was pale.

'He's broken: he's practically done for,' said the Vicar. 'Poor old chap! Absolutely one of the best! Sometimes he seems——'

Jerome refrained from saying what his junior colleague seemed; but at times he and the Vicar had fears of a breakdown in the midst of his work. There were moments of sudden excitement, unrestrained, then determinately subdued.

Gervase was a tired man. The strength which, so little a while since, had been equal to any effort, now seemed readily to flag, as if his spiritual, as well as his physical, powers were becoming exhausted.

'We might have guessed it would come to shipwreck,' said the Vicar. 'No man was less fit to play Quixote in that adventure.'

'I suppose it has come to shipwreck?'

'Could it be anything else? She'd kill any man,

would that particular cat. A thorough bad lot, with cunning, quick wits, and the gloss of a lady. She's the most dangerous sort; incurably vicious with enough cleverness to have won a tolerable success in any decent profession.'

'Then why—why—with all her gifts did she sink to the East End, of all places?' asked Jerome.

'Goodness knows! That's one of the problems. She's not the only person in that boat, as you and I, and all who work here, know. There are heaps of glib scoundrels, men of evident culture, down in the depths, who, judged by their natural gifts, ought to be at the top; but they lack honour, backbone, some kind of grit. They must drift and sink, and stay where they've sunk. It's the plain truth, Arthur, that: the longer I stay here, the more impossible such things seem.'

'Yes, and I can see a hundred reasons why slackers sink and stick at the bottom; but a woman of Poppy Parker's type, who knows enough of refinement to shape sufficiently well—why was she here in these slums, and not in the richer parts? She'd get all the vice she wanted there, without the discomfort and squalor here.'

The Vicar puffed at the inevitable pipe.

'I suppose they don't dislike it. I suppose they haven't imagination enough to see how rotten things are. I suppose she'd as soon put up with a smelly room in Alma Terrace as in a West End flat. They're like rats in a sty; and would be as content in squalor as in Notting Hill Gate.'

'By Jove!' said Jerome suddenly, 'that's just where she is. We shall see how she swallows Notting Hill Gate . . . I'm sorry for poor Gervase. He was absolutely one of the best.'

'Yes! he certainly doesn't deserve it. But it's killing him—it's unnerving him—it's hurt his character. He's not as fine as he was. I can see that.'

'Do you think so?' Both the men were sufficiently mournful.

'I do. There's no question of it. He's all nerves, as he was not in the old days. Twice I've heard him lose his temper; that's a difference, a big difference for him. He's tired out, languid, unsettled, as if he's lost faith in the Church. No one was so certain as he of the Church and himself and everything else before he was married; but now—well, he's different.'

'He ought to practise boxing,' said Jerome solemnly. The Vicar, thereupon, laughed, and so their discussion came to its end.

At the very time they were talking of him, Gervase was facing the first serious trouble that had come since the change to Notting Hill Gate. He had returned to find a restaurant porter, with a tray, waiting patiently before the door of the flat. It was the ordered dinner, with no one to receive it.

'Hallo! Nobody at home?' said Gervase.

'I've knocked and rung, sir,' said the man.

'I'm sorry you've had to wait. I'll take it in. You can leave the tray.'

The simple fact of switching on the lights, and

carrying the tray in, and leaving it with the contents covered on the tiny table of their dining-room brought home to him facts.

In his worry and hard-working, coming in and going away to his work at irregular hours, he had not time in which to estimate things; but now it came to him as a wretched revelation that even in the few weeks they had been there the place had visibly worsened. There was a condition of negligence everywhere. A comb with long hairs accruing was left on the dining-room mantelpiece. Dead flowers lolled in neglected vases. Some picture-newspapers were littered about, a stool was overturned. The fireplace was unkempt. There were cigarette ends and ashes here and there. An empty liqueur bottle was lying on a side table. It was the home of an untidy woman.

He gave an expression of impatience and disgust: and went into his wife's room. The same conditions of carelessness and foretaste of squalor. Evidently she had remained abed till late, for the place was upset, the bed was unmade. A skirt was thrown across it, half hidden under the purple, white and rose padded quilt; a hat, brim upwards, had fallen on the floor. The dressing-table was a confusion of brushes, bottles, cosmetics, wisps of hair, and scattered hairpins.

He went to the kitchen. Similar disorder there as everywhere. Knives, forks, and dirty cups were lying about on the little table.

His own small room, a dressing-room with a stretcher-bed, was the only place where the devastation of her

presence had not intruded and miswrought. To his fevered senses she seemed something worse than human, definitely more sinister, a being imbued with a positive influence for evil, a creature invested and inspired to destroy. Suddenly he loathed her.

He left the dinner untouched, and spent the time in tidying up. He flung the unclean comb from the mantelpiece into the ash-strewn fireplace. He tossed the dead flowers into a waste-paper basket. So he went about the rooms, restoring some measure of order; and as he worked he felt his hate for the woman growing.

At last he was tired, He sat on a sofa to rest. She had not come. He looked at his watch. 'Twenty-past nine!' and ejaculated impatience. The expression, vague and inarticulate though it was, was very like a curse.

He heard her key in the latch; and again looked at his watch. Half-past ten.

He went into the hall and met her.

'Where have you been, Ellen? Dinner has been waiting hours.'

She looked flushed and not unhappy; excited, perhaps a little frightened.

'Has it?' she said.

'It is cold, no doubt, by now——' He spoke sharply. He was puzzled by her appearance. She threw off her cloak and he saw she was in evening dress. Some sweet-scented violets were fastened at her breast.

'Then you might have kept it hot, or eaten it. Haven't you dined?'

'No.'

'Well, Gervase, you really are——' she stopped, seeing the hardening expression of his eyes. She bit her lips and remembered; covered with her hand the diamond pendant fastened round her neck.

'Where did you get that?' he thundered.

'Don't make that noise,' she said quietly. 'You can be heard on the stairs.'

'Where did you get that?' he repeated.

She picked up from the rail of the hall-stand the rejected cloak, and looked at him defiantly.

'If you are going to make scenes, I'm going to my room,' she declared.

'You must first tell me who gave you that.'

'It is mine. I've had it all along.' Her manner was not convincing. She paled as she spoke. She seemed genuinely frightened now.

'Ellen, you know that is a lie.'

She made no verbal answer to that; but merely looked obstinate. Her lower lip drooped as though she was brooding.

'You'd better tell me,' he insisted. 'I must know.'

'Let me pass!' she answered sharply. 'I'm sick of this sort of thing. You are a bully, Gervase——'

'Who gave you that jewel. I demand to know.'

'Oh, go to Hell!'

She tried to push by him; he resisted her. She struggled for a moment, then went back hurriedly a step or two.

'I shall go then!' she said; and turned towards the front door.

Before she could reach it he had sprung forward and prevented her. Doing so he brushed heavily against her; she was thrown against the wall.

'You coward!' she cried.

The passion that had been potent through the evening then found vent. Once again, of a sudden, Gervase lost his self-control and seizing her by the shoulder caught the pendant and with a tug and a twist tore it from the slender chain. She was taken by surprise; but seeing he had captured the trinket she dashed at him fiercely, blindly, with her hands, tore with her nails, stormed and trembled; a tempest and fury.

'Give that to me!' she screamed.

He threw it with all his force on the tesselated floor.

She sprang for it; so did he. She fell on her knees to grasp it, but he was first and with his boot stamped on it, stamped again. Then fortune guiding him, he managed to kick the damaged ornament into a corner under the hatstand.

Still kneeling she fell into a storm of tears. She put her hands before her face, and, crouching, wept with ungovernable anger and passion.

'Get up, and go to your room!' he commanded.

She made no move.

'Get up!'

Still no move.

He bent down and lifted her, carried her into her room; and placed her—with little gentleness and ceremony—on the bed. Then taking the key, he went swiftly out, and locked her in.

CHAPTER XXVI

It was not long before reaction set in and Gervase asked himself whether it had been necessary to be so violent.

He groped under the hatstand for the offending ornament, and after examining it curiously—it was certainly too costly a gem for Ellen to have accepted—put it into his pocket while he considered what to do.

He was still a-tremble through the fury of his feelings, as he pottered about the flat, trying to read, trying to eat some of the neglected dinner, looking out of the window at the well of gardens and the darkened houses opposite.

He wondered whether he should throw the pendant into the world of roofs and yards beneath him. . . .

Poppy made no sound. Twice he went to her door and stood anxiously listening. Silent as the grave. To his keen perceptions, sharpened through the stress he had experienced, there was something ominous in that absolute quiet. He hoped she was asleep; and that the morning would bring reason and peace.

He locked away the jewel in a dressing-case, and took off his coat and collar, meditating bed: but was too

restless and excited. He would only toss and turn on the narrow stretcher in the little dressing-room; so he put on the old cassock he had used at St Brendan's and tried to compose himself with a determined effort of religious thought and prayer. He knelt, endeavouring to centre his attention on the purpose he was seeking; but his thoughts would wander: he could not forget the recent violent scene. . . . Again and again his brain, like an over-wound machine, repeating one series of actions, recreated the horrid passages of the verbal and physical conflict.

The only good that came of that mental ordeal was the consciousness that his violence was justified. It was intolerable that some unknown man—it was, of course, a man—should have given her that expensive present. Why had it been given; for what reason had she accepted it? . . . Poppy had as witness against her the past and that challenging avowal of disloyalty. At the remembrance he writhed again; and paced from room to room, looking out occasionally at the sleeping, silent world.

Besides his natural anger at Poppy's infidelity and defiance, jealousy had come to him. It was no towering, overwhelming passion, such as Iago inspired in Othello; but still it was there—a burning cancer, eating into the vitals of his self-respect. He felt humiliated when he realised that he could care for her in this way; yet so it was—in this way he cared.

The hours of the night wore away. At three in the morning he softly unlocked her door; and then threw

himself, dressed as he was, on his stretcher-bed and sank to a slumber, almost comatose. It was rather swooning than sleeping: it did not refresh.

He had to be away at seven; and as Mrs Archer, the charwoman, would not arrive before then he set about getting himself breakfast. He made coffee: and prepared a cup of tea for his wife. He carried it to the door of her room, and knocking softly said:—

'Here's a cup of tea for you. I'm going.'

No reply came, and when he went the cup was still untouched.

He kept his bicycle in a locked shed in the small yard at the back of the flats.

During the half-hour of the ride to the East End his thoughts were occupied with the ins-and-outs of the traffic, the problems of slipperiness and tram lines, the individualities of policemen, omnibus conductors and elderly women who would look the wrong way; but as soon as he had alighted, was surpliced, and on the way to the chancel to assist Arthur Jerome who was 'officiating,' the devils were out of their own particular heaven and about him again.

In spite of the transcendency and solemnity of the occasion—to him more so than to most men—his mind must wander. Ellen seemed to haunt him; she ruled his thoughts, roused anxieties, perplexed and persecuted him, triumphing over the sacred mysteries.

He went through his duties mechanically, rather as a super in a stale drama than as a ministering priest. Never before had he been so remiss, or, as he judged

himself, so sinful. He mentally whipped his wits, endeavouring to concentrate his attention on the duties of the Sacrament; but ever, inevitably, they tumbled down to the mean and wicked woman he loathed and loved.

That day he worked with a blind and dogged desperation; he visited, lectured, wrote letters, took services, struggled with parochial accounts, trying hard to lose himself in the enjoyment of labour, hoping to forget his persecution of worry. It was not to be. The vision of Ellen in evening dress was constantly before him, with the pendant dangling from her neck—He started! The thought occurred! What a fatuous, careless, absolute idiot he had been! He had left the jewel in his dressing-case—locked. Out of his instinct the certainty flashed to him: she would have hunted for it everywhere and searched in the locked places first.

He did not get home till after nine that night; and until then the fever and the torture beset him. He reached the flat in the last condition of mental, moral and physical weariness: his nerves were rags; never before had he been so exhausted. Poppy was certainly avenged for the alarums of the previous night. He had been hag-ridden all the long day, with her the becoming hag.

He rode homeward, put the bicycle in its stable, and climbed the three flights to their flat. He was so dog-weary now, he could hardly put one foot before the other. Those stairs of stone seemed the highest in Christendom.

As vaguely expected, there was emptiness. Poppy was not at home.

He switched on lights and went into the dining-room. The first thing he saw was a framed photograph of his aunt thrown on the floor, broken. The poverty of Ellen's spirit in wreaking her vengeance so, made him smile tiredly in a sad contempt.

He drank a glass of water, helped himself to some food left on a tray—his wife had evidently lunched and dined at home—but after a few spoonfuls he pushed the plate from him.

It was no use. He could not fulfil his purpose of staying up for her. He went to his room, with labour undressed, got into bed, and at once was asleep.

He was awakened by the sound of his door being opened, shut and locked. The circumstances rather amused him. He was too drugged with sleep to recognise its significance. Then he heard a man's voice: and started up. He sat in bed, listening with all his attention; conscious of the ticking of his watch, the beating of his heart, in the silence of the sleep-time.

He swung out of bed, and was on his way to the door, when he heard Poppy answer. 'It'll be all right now—Good-night,' and the front door shut.

He turned the handle of his door; pushed and rattled it. With an effort he could have forced it open: but he heard his wife close the door of her room. She was safe for the night. Gervase went back to bed, to the blessedness of sleep.

He felt so refreshed the next morning that his first

impression was actually of *joie de vivre*: then, like the falling of black mountains in an avalanche of catastrophe, the truth recurred. It recurred and tormented him. Soon it obsessed him. The self-persecution of yesterday was renewed. He was back in a lower and horrider circle of his own very horrible Hell.

He tried the door. He was still locked in; so he banged at the wooden partition of Poppy's room. As he thumped his anger grew. . . .

'Let me out, you——' he stopped: he had almost shouted an unutterable word. Realising that he had stained himself with the evil intention, he shrank back —trembled, was ashamed. . . . 'Forgive me!' he breathed. It was a prayer sincere. She was making him suffer: contact as well as conflict with her had coarsened him. He recognised the damnatory truth, and was saddened by it. But again, as he realised the trick she had played him, he grew heated with wrath; and was about to force the door when he heard the charwoman letting herself into the flat.

'Mrs Archer,' he called. 'I'm locked in. Will you let me out?'

And so, after pottering and some further explanation and appeal, release came.

'Fancy that, sir! Well, I'm sure!' she exclaimed with the easy comment of the inveterate gossip. 'And 'ow can it 'ave 'appened?'

Gervase grunted ill-temperedly for answer, and marched into the bathroom. While he splashed and refreshed himself, he thought. This condition of things

could not go on. There was evidently to be a determined battle between him and his wife. She would not meet his wishes in any way. Very well, he would compel her. His blood was up. He would make it as difficult as he possibly could for her to continue her immoral ways; and he would not consent to a separation. That he vowed he would not do.

Immoral ways! The words of his thoughts were true; they frightened him. All his sacrifice for her had been in vain. She refused any redemption, no matter what price might have been paid for it: and evidently was casting her lures again before the foolish feet of strange men.

Although she was not changed, yet he was changed in regard to her. Values had been shifted owing to the events of those nights; and he recognised that he was able now to regard her as a thing apart. The influence of her personality had been actual and effective even until the last few hours: but now it was gone. His love for her was killed. Never more could she win him to weakness. . . .

And with his love gone, the hatred, that sometimes had fired him, seemed also gone. . . . But not his anger. That he realised was as ever hot and insistent, when he went into the sitting and dining rooms and was able to appreciate what she had done. Every one of his small intimate belongings, the ornaments and knicknacks, photographs and odds-and-ends, relics of school and college years, of holiday times and St Brendan's, was injured or destroyed.

Mrs Archer came into the room, concern on her face.

''Ow can it 'ave 'appened, sir. It wasn't me; it wasn't me!'

'I know it wasn't you, Mrs Archer. Don't you worry a bit. These things must happen sometimes.'

'Yes, sir,' she agreed with a relieved face. 'But it do seem a pity, don't it?'

She showed a disposition to dilate; but Gervase was not inclined just then for gallipot philosophy, so he begged her to bring in breakfast as he must be going.

While Mrs Archer was away on her mission and sizzling some odorous ham, he pondered what to do about Ellen.

There must be no scene while the charwoman was there; and yet he disliked going to St Brendan's without some effort at a common understanding or a clearance of his own accumulated anger. He must try at least to make it plain that he would be master of his household and not allow her to bring strange men even to the outer door of their flat.

With the impulsiveness and impatience which, with other defects, had grown on him during these last harassing weeks, he went hurriedly at once to her door and knocked.

'Ellen. May I speak to you?'

There was no reply, so he knocked again, louder.

'Ellen, are you awake? I must go soon, and I must have a talk with you first.'

Still no response; so he rapped again, and continued rapping.

'Do stop that damnable row!' she called at last.

'I want to have a talk with you——'

'Then you can't.'

'But I must, it is important. Put on a dressing-gown and let me in——'

'Let you in? You must think me a fool! I'm not going to be struck by you again.'

He was staggered by the accusation.

'I did not strike you!' he began indignantly: and then realising that Mrs Archer was within hearing-distance, he muted his voice.

'Ellen! Ellen! We must arrive at some understanding, and'—he added softly—'Mrs Archer must not hear.'

There was some little pause: then he realised that she was out of bed and speaking from just the other side of the door.

'I've no objection to Mrs Archer hearing,' she said. 'Why shouldn't she? She knows already that you beat me and dragged my——'

'What? You have said anything——' He was shocked, not only at her untruthfulness, but at the meanness of bringing the occasional servant into their private quarrel.

'Yes, I did. I'm anxious the truth should be known about you—you coward, and cad!'

He recoiled from the fierceness of the words. The hate she was able to express through them was unmistakable.

'You are unspeakable, Ellen,' he could not help answering.

'So are you, damn you! Go away from my door!'

That was enough. He gave up the morning attempt at conference.

He breakfasted with what appetite he might, feeling all the while that Mrs Archer, whenever she was in the room, was regarding him with furtive curiosity and watchful suspicion. It was probably imaginary; but Ellen's words had poisoned him.

He took his hat and went. When he was half-way down the first flight he heard his front door open. It was Poppy in a dressing-gown.

She came to the head of the stairs, leaned over the banister, and called, with deliberation, aloud.

'What you want to talk to me about you must write; and I'll get the advice of my friends.'

'Remember, you're in a public place,' he said.

'Oh, I'm not ashamed, though you have reason to be: and'—her voice became gradually louder as she continued to speak—'If you strike me again, one of my friends will thrash you—and I only wish he could kill you! And now you can go to your prayer-meetings, you beastly hypocrite!'

The door slammed. He heard the chain put into position: and then continued his way slowly down-stairs.

'She would be glad if I were dead! he breathed the words. 'She would be glad if some one would kill me.'

CHAPTER XXVII

THERE was no peace and comfort for him that day. Rather was he the more distracted with the torture of his anxieties and angers. Incessantly his trouble haunted him, and though the monster was much of his own making, it was no less sinister and oppressive for that. Whatever his immediate duty might be the actuality of Poppy enclouded him. He could not get away from her. This Frankenstein, beyond the burden of his own private monster, was hunted by the Blatant Beast.

The more he brooded and thought, the more convinced he was that he must punish his wife. But how? That was the difficulty. Being so entirely without scruples she was not amenable to ordinary pressure. Yet punish her he must. If ordinary means did not apply, the extraordinary must be exercised. But what? . . . When he reached home at nine o'clock the solution of this problem was still beyond him.

Yet punished she must be!

He had dined at the Clergy House, and so had nothing to do but wait until his wife came home. He was determined to stay up for her this night, and was prepared and eager to interview any man who might be her escort.

As the time passed Gervase became restless: he walked about the room and could not settle; so to force himself to repose as well as to occupy his mind he took a sheaf of sermon-paper and began to write as full an account as possible of his relations and experiences with Poppy. He did this to clear his judgment of her, to remind himself of details and developments, and ever to rid himself of natural bias, by stating plainly and truthfully the facts from the earliest beginning, when she accosted him in the street, until now. He wrote carefully and with deliberation. He painted her actions and his own in simple tones without adjectives. He did not judge or qualify. He merely stated facts.

He became extraordinarily interested. He forgot that he was a party in the case, and came to see himself and Poppy as creatures apart, caught and dangled on strings in some marionette-show of the gods. Yet it was no unemotional play of puppets: but a thing of very human concern, touching the wells of pity and the heights of bitterness, anger and contempt.

In the earlier stages he was naturally sorry for the girl who had been so badly used by fortune and by men —just as he had been when told of her woes in Alma Terrace. But, as he came to the later chapters, pity went and he grew coldly wrathful. The innocent was transformed to the serpent. The victim had become the devourer. His pen ran with excited speed; and in a very chant of expression he set down horrid and

condemning details of the wilful woman who had struck the hands that were helping her.

As the last words were written, bringing the story to the passages of anger exchanged that morning, he was conscious of the chimes of a distant clock. He looked at his watch.

'Goodness me! A quarter to two!' He rose from his chair and stretched. He yawned—and wondered. She was very late. Where could she be?

He went to the door of the flat and looked out on the misty stairs, with their stony smell and silence.

He shuddered: and shut the door.

He wandered to the window of the dining-room, standing in the darkness and staring at the sleeping world. A few stars were flickering through the haze: he could hear the hoot of a taxicab, a rumble of occasional traffic going to market.

Where could she be? He went back to the table, glanced through the record he had written, and piercing it with the point of a small bronze paper-knife, fastened it at the corner with some string.

He began to grow fidgety: the restlessness that had been drugged by the long labour of writing returned. He thought more deeply of the later pages of the history he had put on record, and felt the renewal of pain and bitterness.

He sat in an arm-chair: but still could not rest. His mind was too active: he was keenly excited. Her brazen defiance, as shown by this staying out, spurred

anew his ready anger. It was intolerable! She must be punished for this also. His hatred of her, stemmed for a time by the evening's busy occupation, and some show of tolerance that had earlier crept in, revived, re-surged like a fury of fire in a flood through his being. He saw red; he trembled with angry passion. He clenched his fists and longed to smite that fool who was now in the toils—was now in her arms!

Imagination set to work and increased his mental torture. Jealousy, too, was aflame. He sprang up and walked on rapid, heavy feet to the front door and back. Where was she now? Where was she? The vixen! The strumpet!

He went to her room, and put on the light. Pah! it was oppressive with stale air and an insistent perfume—patchouli and the scent of violets confused. He threw open the window; and breathed with gladness gulps of vivifying oxygen. He looked again at the untidiness, carelessness, and tumbled disorder . . . He groaned at the tragedy of everything, hurried back to the sitting-room.

Where was she now? Hot jealousy was leading and misleading his imaginings. He saw her at her sport and trade, driving foolish men astray, doing her infinite mischief, ruining lives, ruining souls, an active, destructive influence, busily evil. The sacrifice he had made was not only proved in vain, it was a cause of lasting danger to others . . . He had married her for this!

He stood stock-still like a statue, contemplating the

horror and the truth. His soul grew sick. He loathed her: in his heart he cursed her.

How could he punish her, for she must be punished? He remembered the last words she had thrown at him that morning. They were the direct expression of the desire for his death.

'I wish that he would kill you!'

Death!

There flashed through his mind her only possible punishment. It was terrible; terrible but necessary; as compelling as dark Fate. She who had deceived him, for whom he had bought at a big price freedom and opportunity. She who, despite everything, had opposed and derided him, hurt him and hated him, used him and abused him, stirred up anger and bitter contumely against him; she must suffer in the way she herself had suggested.

He would kill her to-night, when she returned.

He felt at once lighter, freer, strangely happier; and then, after a little while, was conscious of a new dread; not at any pains or consequence he must suffer —for nothing of that could matter now; but at the bitter task before him.

He must kill. Horrible; but he would go through with it unflinchingly. But how should he kill? What instruments were there by which he could cause her death?

He looked about him for murderous ways and means: and thought of some which were promptly rejected. He could hurl her from the window; he could fling her

down the stairs : he had his razor, there were knives . . . he shuddered at those vulgar alternatives.

He raised his capable hands and looked at them. . . . He would strangle her. The difficulty of the task did not trouble him in those minutes of whirling excitement . . . He would be merciless. For the good of the world—for the safety of other men—he would strangle her.

He made himself coffee, and ate biscuits hungrily. He must keep his wits alive and husband his strength. He must not spoil his—handiwork.

He wrote letters to his aunt and to the Vicar of St Brendan's. These he sealed, stamped, and left on the table. In them he told the truth simply and plainly; and took care to let the recipients realise that his purpose in slaying Poppy was not revenge or any such crude impulse; but the determination to end her powers of evil and of causing ruin to souls.

He made his plans for the accomplishment of his purpose—it should be in her room. No other plans, whether for escape or justification, were required. What he was to do should be done gladly as an act of justice; and then he would pay his price.

She did not come. He sat in the arm-chair to wait; then blessedly lost consciousness; slept.

Suddenly he started; sat upright; his wits were alert.

He hurried to her room. . . . She was not there!

Had he been dreaming? Yes : a medley of sleep-madness, an orgy of dreams, riotously incoherent.

Sleep through its opportunities had given him torture, reminding him. Horrible!

He hearkened to the governing silence, went tip-toe quietly to the front door; opened it, peered out. Again he looked down the well of gray, unpleasing stairs and shivered.

No one was there.

Back in the room he found that dawn had come. This surprised him. Soon now she must be back. He exulted to find his purpose was undimmed.

He went to the window, and for a long while, full of thought, and yet with eyes unseeing, stared at the world in that newly awaking day. The commonplace wore a new significance.

He heard the noise of some one approaching. There were feet upon the stairs. He hurried with confidence to the door. He would meet her at once; and the man who was probably with her; and be rid of the one and done with the other, so soon as frank words and the subsequent business would permit. . . . He would be very careful not to give her opportunity to scream.

As he reached the door the brass letter-flap rattled. He saw a note on the mat.

He ignored it for the moment to see who had brought it. He quietly opened the door.

The charwoman was going down the stairs. He saw her rusty bonnet with its bobbing scarlet rose, a fierce horticultural beast.

'Mrs Archer!' he was about to call, when he resisted the tendency. What was the use?

He took the note; and tore it open.

'DEAR GERVASE,

'Things have grown so impossible that I have decided to put an end to it. You were a fool to marry me, as I was to marry you. I am going out of your life, and abroad. You may divorce me or not, as you please. Anyhow, I won't bother you again. I can very well look after myself and now I am going to *live*.

'By the way, you may be interested to know that my father was not a colonel in any army, and his name was not Parker. He was an underpaid curate with too large a family. That's why I came to earn my living—in my own way—and why you found me such an eager Churchwoman.

'In spite of your beastliness lately, I don't hate you. I can't do more than despise you.

'I must go. If I stayed with you I should be sure to drive you mad. So good-bye.

'ELLEN.

'PS. Even that is not my real name. What liars we all are!'

He read with excitement: and then felt, as a grateful tide sweeping through him, a wonderful relief.

He confessed in his heart that the hand of God had intervened. He put it so.

He stood spell-bound for a time, then re-read the

letter. He fell to his knees. Words of blind prayer came to him, and tears.

He was sorry for that woman, the dark threads of whose life had for a little span been intertwined with his; and was glad—glad almost to singing—because the contemplated crime had been prevented.

Now he was free.

He seized his coat and hat, hurriedly looked round the apartments which he vowed never to re-enter, took the record and letters written, and his papers, and, slamming the door, went.

He ran down the stairs like a boy escaped from bondage.

He took his bicycle and rode rapidly to St Brendan's.

GLASGOW: W. COLLINS SONS AND CO. LTD.

HS

YB 33181